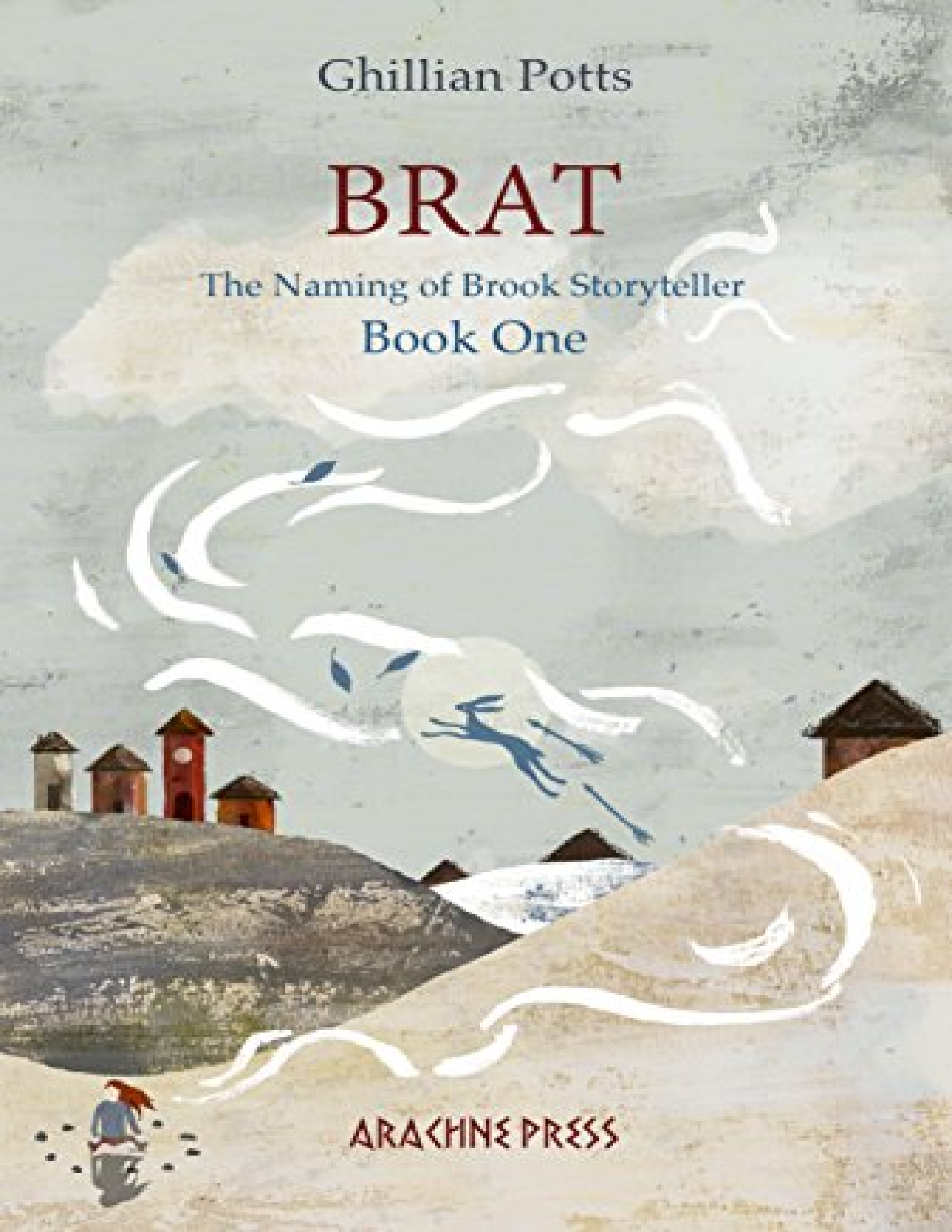


Ghillian Potts

BRAT

The Naming of Brook Storyteller
Book One



ARACHNE PRESS

BRAT

Book One
of
The Naming of Brook Storyteller

by
Ghillian Potts

ARACHNE PRESS

First published in UK 2017 by Arachne Press Limited
100 Grierson Road, London SE23 1NX

www.arachnepress.com

© Ghillian Potts 2017

ISBNs

Print, 978-1-909208-41-4

Mobi/Kindle 978-1-909208-45-2

ePub 978-1-909208-44-5

The moral rights of the author have been asserted.

All rights reserved. This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior written consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Except for short passages for review purposes no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior written permission of Arachne Press.

Printed on wood-free paper in the UK by TJ International, Padstow.

BRAT

Also by Ghillian Potts
The Old Woman of Friuli

Forthcoming
Spellbinder and *Wolftalker*,
Books Two and Three of *The Naming of Brook Storyteller*

CHAPTER ONE

The marketplace was growing more crowded as the day warmed up. The dirty ragged child watched everything with feverish concentration. Her red-brown hair straggled into her eyes and she pushed it back impatiently. She dared not miss anything.

At last her attention became fixed on one corner of the marketplace.

The young man in brown stood quietly leaning on his staff, hardly moving at all as he waited patiently in the mid-morning sunshine. He looked ordinary. His face, his brown skin, his dark hair, cropped short, peasant-fashion, were no different from the folk around him. Only the watching child saw that while he seemed to be lounging casually, there was something a little too controlled about it. He was keeping himself still with an effort. And his air of assurance and independence did not match his coarse drab tunic and trews.

Abruptly a tall thin woman appeared at the brown man's shoulder. He could not, thought the child, have heard her over the noise of the market. Was the man about to be attacked? Stiffening treacherously trembling knees and wiping grimy hands down the grubby sack that did duty for a tunic, the child moved carefully closer. The woman spoke to the brown man from behind. The sudden sound should have made him start yet he controlled the movement at once and merely turned his head slightly.

'Stand there too long, Baylock, and some dog will take you for a tree,' she said, laughing under her breath. Her voice was so clear that it carried to the sharp-eared watcher crabbing gradually nearer.

Baylock frowned and spoke, too softly to be heard by anyone else. The woman shook her head. She took a bite from the large plum she was holding and slurped loudly in an effort to suck up all the juice. The watching child swallowed. She didn't feel really hungry any more, just weak. But it was hard to watch others eat. And she couldn't see clearly. The scene was dimming, swimming... With an effort, the watcher blinked away the haze.

Baylock looked full at his companion at last. He had to tilt his head a little. She was taller by half a head. Were they arguing? wondered the watcher. The man was scolding the woman. She laughed at him and spread out her hands carelessly.

The half-eaten plum shot from her fingers across the roadway. She paid no heed. It would be snatched up by one of the streetskimmers, the beggar children who always hung around the outskirts of the market. Baylock ran his hands over his hair, smoothing the frown from his face as well.

‘You have no news, then?’

‘None. Have a plum.’ She dug into the bag she held in the crook of her arm. She held out a plum to him, then bit into it herself when he shook his head irritably.

‘Then we should leave town today. It is too dangerous for us now. Will you listen to me just this once, Gray? You are the most reckless of idiots but I am too fond of you to leave you to rot in some dungeon. I’d have to try to save you and probably get myself killed in the trying. So for my sake, I beg...’

The child was near enough now. ‘Here is your plum, Lady,’ she said shakily.

Baylock broke off. He and Gray gazed in total astonishment at the bedraggled child who stood solemnly holding out the half-eaten plum. The child stared gravely back at them, not moving. Gray politely took the dusty fruit.

‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘Would you care to try one yourself?’ She held out the bag and, with a small bow, the child took a plum and ate it with neat careful bites.

The two exchanged glances over the child’s head. Gray’s eyebrows asked, his shrug agreed. ‘Are you alone, friend?’ The woman might have been addressing an equal in age and rank. And the child answered in the same style, ‘I am at present alone; I seek my kinfolk.’

Baylock’s face twitched as he tried to smother his amazement. Beggars did not speak so. Gray’s expression of polite interest did not change, but she too was jolted. She crouched, half-kneeling, to bring herself to the child’s level.

‘Do you know where to seek them? May we be of help to you?’ She still spoke formally but her tone warmed it to friendliness.

The child looked away for the first time, swallowing hard. Then she held up her head again defiantly. 'My kin are all Storytellers. I am – I was with my father, Weaveword. He was to tell his Tales before Lord Eaglon... I cannot find him, but everyone knows Storyteller Weaveword! I have only to ask in the right places.' Suddenly the composure broke. 'But it's a week, now, and when I... When I... The gate guards laughed and said he'd never been there!'

The woman's arms went around the child, shielding the tears from any onlookers. 'Of course everyone has heard of Storyteller Weaveword!'

She jerked her head at Baylock and he stepped between her and the marketplace, looking warily around. Nobody seemed to have noticed them and everything was normal for the time of day, with housewives bargaining, dogs and small children getting underfoot and stallholders shouting their wares.

'We'd better get back to the inn before someone notices us,' he said over his shoulder. 'No one is paying attention yet. If we take you with us, child, can we trust you to be quiet?'

The child was indignant. 'Of course!'

Baylock did not turn from scanning the square and the roads leading from it. 'You are worn and hungry, too weak to walk far. I'd better carry you.'

The child drew herself up. 'I can walk!'

'We shall be more noticeable if you collapse in the street than if Bay carries you,' Gray told her. 'You would not wish to put us in danger by drawing attention.'

The child nodded. 'All right,' she said reluctantly and Baylock at once turned and lifted her to his shoulder. He swept the edge of his shoulder cape so that it covered the unusually bright hair and was heading for the road before Gray had grabbed his staff. She had to juggle the bag of plums and almost dropped it. The child peered between her eyelids. She must see where they went. Not that she didn't trust them... but suppose they had to leave her suddenly?

They didn't seem to hurry but they twisted deftly through the crowd and walked briskly down the road that led to the old part of the town, turning off shortly into a maze of alleyways. Here Gray dropped behind, checking for followers and Baylock, keeping most of the child's weight on his left arm so that he could reach his dagger easily, slipped round corner after

corner as quietly as he could without seeming furtive. Presently he waited for Gray. She came silently, as always, smiling.

‘No-one,’ she reported. ‘Shall I take over?’ Baylock looked down at the child, whose head was lolling against his shoulder.

‘No, the brat is asleep. I can manage as far as the inn. You’re better at holding old Barrelbelly’s attention, anyway. He mustn’t see any rag-tag infants entering his precious inn!’

‘Right as usual, Baylock. What should I do without you? Better, probably!’ Gray answered herself and slipped ahead, grinning at his affronted expression.

While Gray kept the innkeeper occupied, Baylock sneaked unnoticed up to their room. He eased his burden gently onto the bed and stood back, rubbing his aching arm. Light as the child was, the weight had seemed to increase with carrying, as weights will, and he had not tried to shift it to the other arm for fear of waking the poor creature.

At this point, the ‘poor creature’ sat up straight in the bed and said furiously, ‘I was not asleep!’

Baylock was taken aback. ‘I thought you were,’ he said feebly.

‘I shut my eyes because your stupid cape kept getting in them. That’s all!’

Gray came softly into the room and shut the door. ‘Gently, child,’ she said. ‘You are not supposed to be here, remember. Now, I’ve wheedled some bread and broth from old Buttertub, and while you eat it – slowly! – we can talk.’

The child giggled weakly. ‘I thought you called him Barrelbelly!’

Gray looked shocked. ‘Sky above, no! Our noble landlord calls himself Goodbarrel. Only vulgar persons would call him Buttertub and Barrelbelly. So you were awake all the time, were you?’

The child nodded, mouth too full to speak. Gray waited for the gulp, and said, ‘Pause a little before you eat more. You will choke. Now, what are we to call you?’

She slipped back into formality for the question. Even a Use-name could be a sensitive point. ‘Brat!’ said the child, with a fierce glare at Baylock.

Gray’s eyebrows rose. ‘Well,’ she said, ‘I am called Gray, and this is Baylock.’ She hesitated and added, ‘I am known also as Graycat. Do you still wish to be called Brat?’

There was a startled silence. Graycat, the outlaw, her Use-name reflected her uncanny ability to disappear in a crowd despite her uncommon height; or to slip into shadow and seem to vanish, one shadow among many. Graycat, who could enter and leave almost any place unnoticed if she did not wish to be seen! For a moment the child's expression softened. Such trust almost demanded a confidence in return. Then she looked at Baylock again.

‘Yes, please,’ she said coldly. ‘Brat.’

Gray shrugged. ‘I shall bring you more food later,’ she said. ‘For now, I suggest you try to sleep. We must wait until the market closes before we leave town and we shall be travelling most of the night.’

‘Leave town? Why? Are you in danger? I can’t leave till I know where my father... You know what has happened to him!’ accused Brat in a shocked whisper.

Gray moved stealthily to the door. She opened it, looked along the passage, closed it again and pushed the bar into place. Baylock was already closing the window. Brat knelt up on the bed, breathing faster and watched in silence.

Gray came to stand by the bed. Softly and distinctly, ‘Your father is dead, Brat,’ she said. ‘Lord Eaglon had him killed two nights since. I have seen his body. You have escaped with your life only because his death is known to very few.’

CHAPTER TWO

Brat did not move or speak, merely stared, rigid. Gray went on, 'The men who laughed at you when you asked for your father did not know of his arrest and death. I think you did not look like the child of Storyteller Weaveword by then.'

She paused and Brat whispered, 'The old woman stole my clothes, those I hadn't sold for food.'

'So, you were lucky that she did.' Gray told her. Brat still stared at her with strained attention. 'But by now you may well be searched for. We can help you out of the town, but you'll have to do as we say. Will any miss you here?'

'No-one.' Brat's frozen stare did not alter.

'Good. And will you do as we ask?' Gray's tone was neither coaxing nor compelling. A small stiff nod answered her. 'One of us must buy provisions, discreetly. Since you must not be known to be in this room, the other must stay here for fear of intruders. Would you have me stay, or Baylock?'

'Baylock,' said Brat.

Baylock was startled. 'I thought...' he began but Gray frowned him to silence.

'You pack, I'll purchase and Brat shall rest,' she said. 'If anyone tries to come in, you have a hangover and want to sleep.' She surveyed Brat thoughtfully. 'We must disguise you, in case anyone remembers you asking for Weaveword. Do you want to be a boy or a girl?'

Brat was surprised out of rigidity. Interest and intelligence returned. 'The guard said 'Run along, lad.' So I'd better be a girl. Only – no lies! Storytellers can't tell lies.'

'No, no lies,' agreed Gray, reassuringly. 'We'll do all the talking. You shall seem to be Bay's little sister. Your features are enough alike if your colouring were similar. I'll see if I can get hair and skin dye and you may choose a wraparound from my spares. Bay, you cut it down for Brat.'

When Gray had gone, Baylock pulled the curtain across.

‘If I really had a hangover and a headache,’ he explained to Brat, ‘I’d want the room darkened. I shall be able to see well enough to pack, you’ll find it easier to sleep and if anyone outside tries to look in – unlikely, but just possible – this makes it harder. Do you see?’

‘Yes,’ agreed Brat in a small voice.

Baylock turned the key in the big chest built in to the foot of the bed. He pulled out Graycat’s shabby leather pack and began to sort her clothes into it. The three wraparounds he spread out on the bed for Brat to choose from. Brat looked them over carefully. They were all too wide and the armholes were too big, but many girl children wore cut-down wraparounds, and a belt would hold it in. There was a plain brooch-pin for the shoulder as well, which would allow for an overlap.

‘Not the blue. Too bright. The green one will be least noticed and it is the straightest. It makes it easier to cut,’ Brat added as Baylock looked blank.

‘Oh. Yes. A good choice.’ Baylock gave the child a thoughtful stare, found Gray’s shears and cut the wraparound to the right length for Brat. He folded the cut-off strip and stowed it in the pack, then persuaded Brat to lie down and try to sleep. He went on packing, moving quietly and steadily. Once he thought he heard a muffled sob and peered at the bed but Brat was breathing deeply and he decided that the child was dreaming.

The packing finished, he sat down on the floor with his back against the door and waited for Graycat to return. He let himself relax completely, knowing that her voice would arouse him at once, and fell into a light sleep.

The stallholders were packing away their planks and trestles as the three set out that evening, their long shadows bobbing across the market square before them as they made for the East Gate. Brat carried a basket covered with a cloth. The other two had their packs. Baylock had rigged them so that they hung like the packs the local farmers used. Since they were leaving town so late in the day, they wanted to look like country folk, not townspeople. There were plenty of country folk going home and they must try to merge with them. Gray had somehow made her slenderness appear sturdy. She wore the bright blue wraparound and her drabbest short cape and moved at a steady plod. A farm girl in her best, out for the day with her suitor and his tagalong little sister.

Baylock concentrated on being inconspicuous. He led Brat by the hand, as if his 'sister' were too tired to walk alone. Brat, as instructed, trudged along, head down, yawning now and then, face partly hidden by the hood of an old cape. They attracted no attention at all, even at the town gate where, Gray and Baylock noticed, there were three times the usual number of guards stationed. Children on their own were looked over carefully and sometimes questioned, but family parties were ignored.

Brat noticed it, too. When they had passed the last outwall cottages and were about half a mile from the gate, she pushed back the hood and looked up at Gray. 'Those soldiers were looking for me, weren't they? They'd have caught me if I'd been on my own.'

'Yes, Brat,' agreed Gray. 'They were looking, but I don't think they knew exactly who for. Just a boy on his own, probably. You might have been safe in anyone's company.'

'No, I mightn't. You two saved me.' Brat stood still and tried to see both faces at once. 'Only, why did you? I didn't ask before. I wasn't sure there really was any danger, even after you told me about... my father. I pray you tell me why you should endanger yourselves for me?'

Gray gave Baylock a nod and he said, 'We owe our lives to your father's courage. We can never repay that debt to him, but some of it we may repay in helping you.'

'There are many Stories about Graycat,' Brat said thoughtfully. 'My father used to tell some of them, when we were sure of our listeners. Are there any about you?'

Baylock's already dark complexion darkened still more. Gray was grinning wickedly and he glared at her. 'No, Brat, there are no Stories about Baylock,' he said. 'Baylock is a very quiet, sober, cautious man and no-one sings songs or tells Stories about that sort of person.'

'Then I'll tell one.' Brat was firm. 'There ought to be a story about you, too.'

Gray was shaking with silent laughter; reluctantly, Baylock began to follow suit.

'Thank you, Brat,' he said hurriedly, controlling his voice with a huge effort, 'but I truly don't mind if there are no Stories about me. D-don't you think Gray might be jealous if my story turned out to be more popular than hers?'

With the last words he gave way entirely and after a moment Brat, still not seeing the joke, also caught the infection and they all laughed until they had to sit down on the grass verge to recover themselves.

‘Where are we going?’ asked Brat. ‘I ought to try to reach my kinfolk and tell them about my father.’

‘We sent out messages as soon as we knew of his death,’ Gray said quickly. ‘But they could not go direct since we did not know where Weaveword’s nearest kin might be. Can you tell us?’

Brat was puzzled. ‘Who did you send to, then?’

‘To friends who would pass the word on. But they might not know where to send, either. It would be safer for your folk if they knew as soon as possible.’

Brat nodded. ‘My great-uncle Silkentongue will be in the City until the end of next month with his wife, Sweetvoice. My grandmother Gentle – she usually travels with us, you know – went to visit my aunt Galewind because she is going to have a baby soon and she lost her first. They will be in Westrin village in Southmoor Shire until after the baby is born. My mother’s half-brother, Speaksilver, should be somewhere between Notrel and Brightside at the moment; he ought to reach Brightside within twenty days. His eldest son, Speakstream, has taken a wife from among the Wilders and will be visiting her relatives in Gildenforest for at least six weeks. Speaksilver’s daughter, my cousin Fleet, has gone north through Vanna Shire and will spend the autumn there, on the Long Circuit. My second cousin...’

‘Hold, enough!’ Baylock had been frantically trying to memorize this flood of information, while Gray made hasty notes in a series of dots punched with a dagger point in a broad leaf she pulled from the wayside.

Brat looked offended. ‘You asked!’

‘Yes, indeed. However, we did not expect quite so many answers,’ Baylock told her, apologetically. Brat watched Gray interestedly.

‘I’ve never seen that done before. It’s writing, isn’t it? Grandmother says it ruins the memory and never lets me watch when there are scribes about.’

‘Your grandmother is right,’ agreed Gray, gazing ruefully at her leaf. ‘On the other hand, we being none of your family or kinfolk, you cannot expect us to have your memory. Think of our memories as sieves, if you like!’

‘Well, which of my family and folk do you want?’ Brat asked. ‘I can tell you where most of them are.’

‘Better you do not know which,’ said Gray, soberly. ‘What you do not know can not be forced from you.’

Brat paled under the skin dye. ‘You did not say how my father died.’

Gray looked at her steadily. ‘No. It is enough for you to know that none of his knowledge was forced from him. Thus do Baylock and I – and others – owe our lives to Storyteller Weaveword.’

Brat swallowed hard and, after a moment, continued the roll call of Storytellers very soberly indeed, while Gray made notes.

A mile further on, Brat said, ‘Graycat, you have told me who you are. That knowledge could be forced from me.’

‘Do not trouble yourself for that, child,’ Gray answered calmly. ‘I, Graycat, give you my word to bring you safe to your kin. If you are taken, I shall be dead.’

CHAPTER THREE

Next morning, Brat awoke in a haystack, with almost no recollection of lying down there. They had walked for miles the night before to get as far as possible from Lord Eaglon, and Brat had been far too tired and footsore to care what the bed was like so long as it meant rest. Baylock, on the far side of the stack, was yawning and combing strands of hay and grass seeds from his hair with his fingers. There was no sign of Graycat.

‘Where’s Gray?’ demanded Brat, looking anxiously around.

‘She’s gone to see a friend a few miles off who may be able to lend us horses. He will also pass on the messages for your folk. She’ll come back for us in a while. How would you like to ride for a few days?’

Brat considered. ‘My feet hurt now, but I daresay other bits would hurt if I rode. I’ve never ridden a horse so I don’t really know. I’ve heard that you feel very stiff and sore at first.’

Baylock nodded, solemnly. ‘Absolutely correct. Gray likes big horses, too, which would make it even more uncomfortable for you. Perhaps she will be able to borrow a pony. We need to hurry even though we are no longer in Eaglon’s Lordship. This is part of old Lord Sternhand’s land. But although he likes Eaglon as little as Eaglon likes him, he still would not help us if Eaglon’s men should catch us. Do you know the story of why Eaglon hates Sternhand?’

‘Oh, yes!’ Brat grinned at the reminder. ‘Everyone knows it, I think, but they still ask for it. And laugh at the bit where Lord Eaglon has to go home with his tail between his legs. Father always...’ She stopped suddenly.

Baylock looked up quickly and looked away again. He was unwrapping some bread and cheese from the basket Brat had carried the evening before. ‘Come and break your fast,’ he said. ‘I ate with Gray, an hour ago. Now, tell me,’ as Brat made short work of the food, ‘do you tell Stories yourself yet?’

Brat hesitated over the last chunk of bread. ‘Yes. Tales, mostly. Of course I’m not allowed to tell many Stories. I know lots that I can’t recite;

not yet, anyway. People wouldn't listen to a child telling any of the Great Cycle, like, for instance, *The Sorceress and the Dragon*.'

Baylock nodded encouragingly and Brat went on, around the crusty end of the loaf, 'I can tell Tales like *Weatherchild* and *The Lady Who Loved the Sky* and *The Clever Maidservant*, all the ones the women like to hear. Men mostly won't pay to hear a child, but the women often give extra.'

'I don't think I know *Weatherchild*', said Baylock. 'Would I like it?'

Brat looked at him measuringly. 'No. Nor would Gray, I think. It is too sweet for you.' This was clearly a professional judgement, professionally delivered. Baylock nodded, accepting it.

'Have you any objection to doing a little storytelling as we go?' he asked. 'We don't want you recognised, of course, but it is always useful to have an obvious profession. People take less notice of you if they know what you are.'

Brat frowned. 'You're not a Storyteller.'

'No,' agreed Baylock. 'You think I would spoil your act? I am an entertainer of sorts, however!' He reached forward and drew an egg from Brat's ear. The egg at once appeared to turn into a coin, then into a kerchief and lastly became a pebble.

Brat's eyes were round. 'How did you do that?'

'Wouldn't you like to know! Will I do, Storyteller?'

'Yes! You're very good,' said Brat, admiringly. 'Can Gray do that, too?'

'Gray is a tumbler. We both juggle,' said Baylock. 'We sing as well.'

'I can sing,' said Brat eagerly. 'If I tell some of the Tales that have songs in them, we can all sing the songs. That will make us seem to belong together, won't it?'

Baylock's look was genuinely respectful. 'That is very well thought of. Would you like to learn a little juggling, too?' Brat hesitated. A Storyteller of Weaveword's standing would never condescend to juggling. But in the interest of disguise... and Brat had always secretly envied jugglers...

Baylock watched the changing expressions on Brat's face for a moment, and bent to rummage in his pack. He drew out three balls, one scarlet, one bright blue and one golden and began casually throwing and catching them.

A little after noon, a young man riding a big chestnut mare and leading a bay gelding came to the field gate. He whistled, three clear notes like a

bird call and Baylock ran to open the gate. The young man rode through, slid to the ground, pushed back his hood and became Gray.

Brat gave a whoop and ran shouting to Gray, 'Watch me! I can juggle! Baylock says I've learned fast!'

Gray obediently watched, still talking low-voiced to Baylock, and all the while absently rubbing the mare's neck. She broke off to applaud Brat's performance, apologised for cutting it short and asked them both to get ready to ride. 'You'll have to ride pillion, lazy-lady style,' she told Brat. 'I did try to find you a pony, but the only one was too fat and slow. We must travel cross-country for awhile.'

Brat crouched down to put the balls away in Baylock's pack and, carefully not looking at Gray, asked, 'Is there danger?' in a casual voice.

'Not immediately. There is now a rumour of a search but it is for a copper-haired boy, on his own. For the present we are safe enough. Indeed, I think if we went to Lord Sternhand we could even claim his protection for you against Eaglon. He is an honourable man and makes no war upon children. The difficulty would be to reach him; and, of course, it would not bring you to your family.'

'Would it – would it make you and Baylock any safer?' asked Brat.

'To leave you with Sternhand? I don't think it would make much difference. In a way, you help to disguise us. We can't move quite so fast with you, it's true, but you are excellent cover. Nothing appears so innocent as a family group!'

'I suppose that was why Father brought me with him,' said Brat, bleakly. 'To cover whatever he was doing... and I don't even know what it was.'

'Nor may I tell you,' said Gray. She turned from buckling her pack to the mare's saddle. 'Listen to me and take this comfort to you, Brat. Weaveword brought you because he believed you to be safer with him than with any of your family. He did not know that he was already betrayed.'

'How do you know?' began Brat, but Gray was already swinging up onto the mare's broad back. 'Help Brat mount,' she told Baylock, briskly.

Baylock lifted Brat to sit sideways behind Gray. The pillion had a footrest, but Brat's legs were too short to reach it. She clutched at the sides of the pillion, feeling wobbly and Gray, looking over her shoulder, said, 'Can you rig this strap to act as a stirrup, somehow?'

Baylock considered the problem but had to shake his head. 'The only thing to do,' he said, 'is to fasten it round the two of you, like a sling to hold you together.'

The strap was passed over Gray's left shoulder and under her right arm to be buckled under Brat's left arm. Brat's right side was held firmly against Gray's back; the strap gave support front and back and Brat felt much safer but there was no denying it was undignified. She said so, crossly. 'Anyone would think I was a baby!'

'On a horse, you are,' said Baylock, his voice suddenly sharp.

The mare seemed not to notice her extra burden as they set off, and for a while Brat even enjoyed the ride. They followed a cart track at first, shaded from the midday sun by overhanging trees. The dust puffing up around the horses' hooves powdered only their legs and the glimpses of fields and meadows between the trees kept Brat interested.

Then they turned off the track and began to climb to the moors. The sun was hot, a proper harvest sun, in a brilliant sky and Brat grew thirsty and the strap sweaty and uncomfortable. The horses had to walk, then trot, then walk again as they cut across the ridges and Brat was jolted to and fro with the rough going and longed for the smooth canter of the first part of the journey. But she had made up her mind never to complain.

'They shan't say I'm a burden,' she told herself and clenched her teeth against the pain.

The sun was directly behind them, very low in the sky, when at last they left the high moors and came down into a river valley. The weary horses splashed across a ford, downstream from a small village, where lights were beginning to show in the dusk.

Brat forced herself to sound interested. 'Are we there yet?' she asked.

'That is Ash village. We are not staying there,' said Gray. The mare heaved up the far bank and stood with drooping head as Baylock's gelding, in not much better case, joined her.

'Not much further!' said Baylock, cheerfully, dismounting. 'Just a short walk.'

He reached to unbuckle the strap around Gray and Brat and cursed when his stiff fingers refused to work. Gray pulled the buckle away from him and between teeth and fingernails forced the leather to give way. Baylock was just in time to catch Brat, who toppled limply forward as soon as the strap was released. They collapsed together in the long dew-damp grass,

Brat giggling weakly. Gray urged the mare forward again and the gelding followed. Brat, trying to stand on legs that seemed to have turned to dough, said on a note of alarm, 'Gray! Where are you going?'

'To leave a false trail,' said Gray, her voice hoarse with fatigue. 'Baylock will take you to the camping ground.'

To Brat, everything after that was swimming in weariness. They walked, slowly and creakily, through a copse, wriggled between bushes, tripped over brambles and suddenly dipped down into a hollow where a fire glowed and the night seemed to gather over them. A dog growled softly. A voice silenced it. Baylock answered some sort of challenge.

Then Brat was told to lie down and sleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

Suddenly it was morning again. Brat woke with a jolt to see Gray, once more dressed as a woman, cooking over an open fire. There were other women by the fire; they looked like gypsies, thought Brat, or perhaps not, not quite. And surely one of them was familiar...

‘Cousin Scapegrace!’ exclaimed Brat, sitting up in a cocoon of blankets. She groaned as every bruise and ache she’d collected yesterday began to complain. One of the women ran and plumped down on her knees beside Brat, laughing.

‘Not any more, cousin,’ she said, her whole face crinkling with merriment. ‘I am Gracewell now and First Actress in my husband’s Company. Well, first after my husband’s mother and his two sisters!’ The other women joined her, all laughing.

‘My daughters are all three equal,’ announced the oldest woman firmly, hugging Gracewell. ‘Welcome, cousin of my son’s wife,’ she went on, holding out a hand to Brat. Brat scrambled stiffly up, bowing.

‘I thank you, mother of my cousin Gracewell.’

From the cooking fire Gray said, ‘Are you hungry, Brat?’ and laughed at the expression on Brat’s face.

Hunger satisfied, Brat went to look at the encampment. Gray said that exercise was the best way to overcome the pain of strained muscles but Brat, balancing between a pile of horse dung and a patch of nettles, was not so sure. Everything hurt.

The Actors’ wagons were much larger than the Storytellers’ covered carts. Brat was used to travelling in a small family group. A Storyteller wagon was rarely expected to hold more than four adults. Any children slept under the wagon in country places and in it whenever the adults chose to take rooms in an inn. If the weather were very bad, everyone squashed in together.

But the Actors had to find room for costumes, properties and painted backcloths as well as for themselves. The back of the largest wagon, as Brat soon discovered, could be let down to become a stage, cramped but

usable, if no other acting space was available. Besides Gracewell, her husband Harvest, his mother and his two sisters, there were two other family groups and several unattached young men and girls all distributed between the five wagons. It was almost like a small moving village, thought Brat.

Graycat had merged into the group of women. She might have been one of them all her life. She had a different use-name here, too. The Actors called her Silverswift or Swift-sure. Baylock had become a horse-handler and was being called Tallowhair. One of the children told Brat that this use-name had been given him because the first time he had joined them someone had dripped tallow from a hot candle on his head. 'Better not say why!' said Berry, giggling.

Brat felt her own hair. Gray had cropped it to lie evenly and dyed it black. Her skin was now a deep brown. The skin dye seemed fast enough, but Brat felt nervous. Suppose she got caught in some rainstorm and found black dye running down her face? Gray laughed at her. 'It's safe! And I have some more of the dye here,' she said. 'Rub it into your scalp from time to time to keep the roots dark and you will be fine.'

By mid-morning, the camp had been broken up. The horses were harnessed to the wagons, the chestnut mare and the bay among them.

'Are we going to walk now?' Brat asked.

'No, we're going with the Actors to the next town,' explained Baylock. 'Then, after the performance this evening, we'll take the horses again and ride on.'

Brat and Silverswift, it appeared, were to take part in the performance. One of the older children swung up into the wagon belonging to Harvest's family, in which Brat, Tallowhair and Silverswift were riding, to coach them in their parts. Brat was very soon word perfect. Getting by heart the tiny part allotted to a novice was nothing to a storyteller's trained memory. Acting the part might be another matter. The child, pleased and surprised at Brat's quickness, took it for granted that the acting would be all right, but Brat was nearly rigid with stage-fright.

Gracewell was the only one who seemed to understand.

'You've told the *Tongue-twister* Tale, haven't you?' she said. 'Well, acting this part will seem like nothing at all by comparison. I promise you, Brat!'

‘I just feel hollow,’ said Brat, gloomily. ‘I’d rather make a mess of the *Tongue-twister* than let all of you down.’

‘You won’t,’ said Gracewell confidently. ‘Tell me, cousin, why did you choose ‘Brat’ for a use-name?’

‘Something that Bay – uh – Tallowhair said; and it’s a neutral sort of name.’

‘Neuter, too!’ Gracewell gave her infectious chuckle. ‘So you can be a boy or a girl?’

‘Yes. Bay – uh, Tallowhair thinks it’s safer,’ Brat told her. ‘I can’t explain but you’ll not tell anyone, will you?’

‘Never in the world! But why not use your own name? ‘Brook’ is not uncommon and could be either boy or girl.’

Brat glanced over at Swiftsure, who was still memorising her part. ‘I suppose it is silly, not to tell them. I wanted something private, you see. They know so much more than I do about everything. But maybe I should? She trusted me...’

‘Hush!’ Gracewell was urgent. ‘If Swiftsure trusted you in anything, anything at all, never mention it. Not to me, not to anyone! What I don’t know...’

‘You can’t be forced to tell. Yes, I know,’ said Brat. ‘But I don’t know anything, really.’

‘Just as well for both of us, cousin.’ Gracewell slid back into her own tiny compartment, leaving Brat to wonder what, if anything, Gracewell knew. Did she even know that Weaveword was dead? Brat hastily shut that thought away. Gracewell had shown no curiosity about Brat’s presence in rather odd company. She behaved as if her young cousin were on a long-planned visit. Brat, remembering a younger, scatter-brained, rather bossy and inquisitive cousin Scapegrace, decided that marriage had improved her. She went back to worrying about the play.

She need not have bothered. They arrived at the little town just before dusk to find that a curfew had been imposed and the performance was cancelled.

Everyone crowded into the largest wagon to discuss possible alternatives and the noise of twenty or so Actors furiously arguing with each other was so great that Gracewell was able to talk privately with Silverswift and Tallowhair under cover of the din.

‘I suspect this curfew is another means of hunting you,’ she said. ‘You will have to stay with us until tomorrow at least. Will anyone here recognise either of you or the horses?’

Tallowhair and Silverswift exchanged glances. ‘There are three in this town would know me,’ said Tallowhair, ‘but not as Tallowhair or as Baylock.’ He hesitated, frowning.

Silverswift put in hastily, ‘The horses are safe enough. Come worst to worst, I have a bill of sale for them made out to Graysteel. I can shift back to man’s clothing.’

Brat was puzzled for a moment, then realised that Graysteel must be the use-name that Gray gave when dressed as a man.

‘But you yourself are not known here?’ pursued Gracewell.

‘Not by any now living.’ Brat had never heard that grim tone before, nor seen her look so stern and fierce. Some of Weaveword’s Stories about Graycat came sharply to mind and sent a shiver down Brat’s spine. This was the Graycat who had killed Lord Weir in the midst of his men and laughed as she slipped away, leaving them striking at each other in their efforts to reach her. Brat wondered, very soberly, what had happened to those who had once known Graycat in this town.

‘Nevertheless,’ Silverswift went on, ‘we must part company. Curfew or no curfew, we leave tonight.’

She looked down at Brat, squeezed between them. ‘Will you come or stay? You are safe with your cousin, I believe.’

Brat looked at Gracewell. ‘But is my cousin safe with me? I am a dangerous guest, I think. I will go with you and Tallowhair, if you both think fit.’

Tallowhair grinned and nodded, Silverswift looked thoughtful and nodded.

‘Better to go as a boy,’ said Gracewell hastily. ‘Wraparounds are not well suited to crawling through bushes. I will find you leggings and tunic, cousin.’ She paused, then burst out in a furious undertone, ‘what under Sky possessed Weaveword to take you with him? You are a child still! He never...’ she broke off as Tallowhair squeezed her shoulder. He glanced towards the other members of the company, who were now so tired that they were ready to listen instead of trying to shout each other down.

Harvest, who had been shouting as loudly as any, dominated the assembly by sheer staying power.

‘All those in favour of giving the performance tomorrow afternoon?’ he demanded. More than half those present called out ‘Yes!’ or put up a hand. ‘Those in favour of moving on at first light?’

No-one stirred.

‘Who wants to move on tomorrow without giving any performance, to punish the town for this curfew?’ A few sheepish hands went up and were lowered almost at once. Put like that it did seem petty. ‘Right.’ Harvest set his fists on his hips and glowered round. ‘No more arguing. I go to see the authorities in the morning, to arrange the time and place and we perform when and where we may. AND,’ he paused for emphasis, ‘we do not break their silly curfew just for the hell of it! I mean you, cousin!’ He pointed at a very handsome young man who was fidgetting crossly. ‘I know you have a girl in the town. Well, you can visit her tomorrow.’

Gracewell whispered hurriedly, ‘Get back to our wagon, quickly. I’ll follow in a minute.’

As they slipped out, Harvest was saying, ‘Guild oath on it, Golden, all of you!’

‘You’re not of their Guild, are you, Silverswift?’ asked Brat, as they crossed to the wagon they had travelled in.

‘Among others, yes. Had I taken the oath, I must have kept it.’

‘Gracewell got us out just in time, then. She knew Harvest would require Guild oath! She’s quick,’ said Brat admiringly.

‘Even though she did marry into the Actors’ Guild,’ said Tallowhair, solemnly, ‘you may still be proud of her!’

Brat, trying not to laugh, shot him a scornful look and said, ‘Kin is kin.’

Gracewell found Brat a dull brown tunic and leggings and Brat scrambled into them while the others were packing. The green wraparound was folded into Silverswift’s pack together with the rest of the woman’s gear and Silverswift became Graysteel, in the mid-brown tunic and leggings Baylock had been wearing when Brat first met them.

‘The horses belong to Fullgather of Risingwater,’ Graysteel told Gracewell, handing her the bill of sale. ‘Get them back to him when you safely can. Take no risks, mind! Fullgather does not expect them at any particular time.’

Gracewell nodded, hugged Brat and, astonishingly, bowed low to Graysteel and Baylock. ‘Fare well, all of you,’ she said, and turned hastily away to her own compartment.

They left the wagon by a trap door, so well concealed that Brat had not even suspected its existence. All the wagons had them, so Graysteel said, but unless you were shown you would never find one of them. They all had cunning locks that would hold them shut against any testing should it ever be suspected that they were there.

‘Only two members of each troupe know of the trap doors,’ said Graysteel. ‘Harvest showed me this one this morning, under Guild oath of secrecy.’

‘But we aren’t Guild members, and we know,’ pointed out Brat, worried.

‘We did not see how it was opened, and we can swear silence on our own account,’ said Baylock. ‘I promise to forget it as quickly as I can, Bowman’s oath.’

‘Storyteller’s oath,’ agreed Brat, hastily. ‘Although it isn’t easy to forget things, not for us.’

In the dusk they crept silently away from the wagons.

CHAPTER FIVE

It was full dark before they left the thicket beyond the town walls where they had hidden themselves. The walls were in some places no more than a hedge and a ditch. They had wriggled through the hedge and crossed the ditch dryshod on a plank that Gray ‘found’ lying conveniently to hand on the bank. They had drawn it over after them and carried it some way before leaving it against a tumbledown barn, to be ‘found’ by its owner next day.

Now, even though their eyes had grown used to the darkness, they could see little more than an arm’s length in front of them. There was no moon and they were going cross-country guided by the stars, so that they tripped and stumbled drunkenly.

Baylock, a little in advance, suddenly gasped and disappeared as if the ground had opened up. He had found one of the sunken lanes of the region by falling into it. Gray and Brat slid down the bank after him, and found themselves, so Gray said, in the very lane she had been making for. Brat could not decide how she or anyone could tell in the darkness.

They reached a farmhouse at dawn. Brat was too tired to notice anything about it save that the farmer’s hay-filled mattresses were soft and smelled sweet. They slept there until dusk. Then they set out again by forest paths, sleeping by day and walking by night, eating the smoked sausage, the cheese and rye-bread the farmer had given them, lighting no fires and leaving as little sign of their passage as possible.

At twilight on the fourth day since they had left the Actors, Gray decided that they should walk for only half the night. They were near the border of the Joined Lands and night-goers would be suspect there. ‘If we are stopped by the Borderers,’ Baylock explained to Brat, ‘we want it to be by day. At night they are likely to loose first and ask questions afterwards.’

Brat shuddered, imagining an arrow in Gray’s heart. Or Baylock’s, or Brat’s own, of course. But at least, thought Brat, if it was me got shot, Gray and Baylock could probably get away. If it was Gray, I think Baylock would want to stay with her. And so should I. And if Baylock were shot?

Gray would get him away if he was only wounded, if it were humanly possible; and if not...

Brat remembered Gray's calm voice that first night, saying, 'If you are taken, I shall be dead.' If Gray were wounded and could not walk, she would expect to die, by her own hand or by Baylock's; and if Baylock were hurt and could not escape, then Gray would kill him. Yet somehow Brat felt sure that, while Baylock might find it easier to die with Gray, Gray herself would not let anything come before her duty to save Brat. If she had to slit Baylock's throat to spare him questioning, she would do so and not even stop to avenge him.

They met no patrols. At moonrise they camped, slept in perfect safety, and went on again at dawn, eating the last of the bread and smoked sausage, divided exactly in three by Baylock.

They had all become very bored with the cold food. But Brat would never forget those days after Weaveword had vanished, when hunger had become a familiar enemy and starvation seemed only too probable.

'If I hadn't noticed Gray and Baylock, if Gray hadn't lost her plum so that I had an excuse to speak to them, I might have died. Or been taken by Lord Eaglon's men.' Would starving to death have been preferable? Brat wondered. She ate the sausage slowly and carefully.

They met the Borderers that day.

Baylock had reluctantly agreed that they must buy food, and, since they would have to enter some town or village to do so, that they should give a show.

'How else can we account for having the money to buy food?' demanded Gray. So they walked boldly into a little village at midday and Graysteel and Baylock did some juggling and Brat told the Tale of *Weatherchild* to an audience of children and housewives (who all sighed and cooed in the right places) and then some of the men strolled up and one of them asked for the Story of *The False Dragonmaster*.

Brat had never before told this story in public but, encouraged by the success of *Weatherchild*, began cheerfully enough, 'There was a man who claimed he could master the Dragons...' and found that the story flowed easily until she reached the famous Summons, 'Come, Gold-guardians dreaded! I summon you, Sky-swimmer. Cave-crawler, I call you. I invoke you, Wave-walker. By batwing and talon, by balefire and fang I summon you hither. Come to me! Come!'

Here Brat, in the character of the Dragonmaster, looked up over the heads of their audience and discovered that it had suddenly doubled. The Borderers had arrived!

But nothing could be allowed to interrupt a story. All Storytellers had that drummed into them from birth. Had the famous Goldentongue allowed even earthquakes to stop him? Well, one earthquake and he and his audience had been safely in the open at the time, but he had completed *The Story of Brine and the Rhymer* and he had held his audience.

So now Brat swallowed hard and continued steadily, 'And so the Three Elder Dragons came. Out of the earth, up from the water and down from the air they came and the False Dragonmaster turned pale and paler and his tongue clove to his mouth's roof and he shook and shuddered with terror. One Dragon is fearful enough to freeze a man's blood; the Three will drive him mad with dread. The watching folk fled screaming, for they saw that the Dragonmaster could never master these Dragons; and the Dragons let them go. But the self-styled Dragonmaster they tore into little, little pieces and left the scraps lying for the carrion crows to scavenge. Then they went back to their own place. And from that day to this, no-one has ever been so foolhardy as to call forth these most wonderful and terrible of all living creatures.'

There was a satisfied sigh from the listeners and applause, cut short by the realisation of the Borderers' presence. Brat felt swollen with pride. Her audience had been sufficiently spellbound not to notice the soldiers until the end of the story!

Graysteel and Baylock were questioned, but briefly and casually. No-one bothered with Brat, who sat tight on Gray's pack containing all the women's clothes, and hoped that the soldiers would not think to search it. Baylock was claiming Brat as his youngest brother, an apprentice Storyteller. Graysteel, it appeared, was a recent addition to their act, their father having lately died. Brat listened admiringly to the string of plausible lies dropped carelessly by Baylock into the ears of the Borderers' captain, who accepted them without further inquiry. Storytellers were hardly ever bothered by soldiers, nor were most entertainers unless there happened to be a lot of smuggling going on, or something of that sort. Then they might be searched and questioned.

Brat had never had cause to fear soldiers or guards before. Now, noticing the way the villagers slipped away – though not before Graysteel

had passed round the collecting bowl – she wondered if the villagers were all cheating on their taxes.

These Borderers seemed merely news-hungry, curious about what was happening in the rest of the Joined Lands and happy with the carefully edited items that Baylock and Graysteel supplied. Before he left, the captain even complimented Brat on the storytelling.

‘I’m sorry we missed the start of the story,’ he said. ‘You told it well, lad. But aren’t you afraid the Dragons may come when you recite the Summons?’

He laughed and poked Brat in the ribs. Brat looked solemn. ‘Oh, no, sir. We always leave out one line, so that the Summoning is incomplete.’

The officer roared with laughter and went away.

Baylock looked rather oddly at Brat and said, ‘Is that actually true?’

Brat glared at him. ‘Of course. Who wants to call up a Dragon?’

‘Do you know the missing line?’ pursued Baylock.

Brat nodded, scowling. ‘I know it,’ she said.

Baylock shrugged, and turned to Gray, who was counting the coppers she had collected from the audience.

‘Six copper pieces, mostly in quarters, four eggs and a loaf of bread,’ she announced. ‘Very good indeed for a place this size. The Captain gave a whole copper piece, did you know? A real tribute to you, youngster!’

‘You actually stuck the bowl under his nose?’ Brat stared at her.

Gray was amused. ‘Of course. What else?’

Brat considered the matter and realised that for Graycat no other course was possible. What else, indeed!

By evening, their stores replenished, they had crossed into the next shire, unnoticed. Baylock sighed with relief, to Gray’s amusement.

She had been totally unconcerned ever since they had encountered the Borderers, as if, since they had met one danger safely, they were now safe from all others. Brat could not help siding with Baylock, who snapped at Gray that she was too casual; anyone would think she carried the Luckstone itself!

Gray laughed and Baylock turned angrily and walked ahead, so rapidly that Brat could not keep up. Gray deliberately slowed her pace a little, but Baylock marched on, his back rigid with rage and vanished around the next turn of the road.

‘No need to wear yourself out, Brat,’ said Gray, ‘he’ll forget to be angry in a while. We’ll catch up sooner or later.’ Then, as Brat still looked worried, ‘Why don’t you tell me one of the Tales about the Luckstone?’

Brat considered. ‘Do you know *The Tale of Lady Carnelian*?’

‘No. Let’s hear it,’ said Gray cheerfully.

So Brat began.

CHAPTER SIX

The road continued to bend and twist between the trees and still they got no sight of Baylock. Presently Gray grew uneasy. She began to walk faster and Brat had to half run to keep up.

‘I swear I’ll never again travel in company!’ Gray muttered. ‘Stupid, stiff-necked...!’

They turned the final corner and there lay the road, straight ahead for perhaps half a mile, the trees crowding close on either hand. They had an excellent view now of Baylock. He was standing still in the centre of the road, a hundred paces or so ahead of them. Beyond him three men faced him, warily. Baylock held his staff in the guard position, one end low. The three obviously recognised his stance and respected it. They were spreading out to outflank him.

Gray stopped dead. She pulled off her pack, never taking her eyes off Baylock, and fumbled hastily in one pocket of it.

‘Look after it,’ she said, thrusting the pack at Brat, and began to run swiftly and smoothly towards the men. As she ran she shook out the folded cloth she had taken from her pack and as soon as she was within range, halted.

Open-mouthed, Brat watched. Gray was swinging the cloth around her head, one-handed, faster and faster. Then the nearest of the three bandits yelled in startled pain as his leg buckled under him, Baylock leaped forward to strike at the head and arm of the second man, and the third, sword in hand, began to run furiously at Gray. He did not get far. Gray’s next stone caught him on the shoulder. He staggered, dropping his sword, tried to snatch out a dagger left-handed and stopped dead, the metal-shod tip of Baylock’s staff poking his kidneys.

Brat had never seen a slingshot in action before. The speed and accuracy of Gray’s aim was an eye-opener. She had seemed almost casual, whirling her apparently harmless strip of cloth but here were two men helpless, one lying in the road, unable to rise, the other swearing and

clutching a limp right arm, on the verge of collapsing with pain. Brat shook her head, picked up the pack and went to join Gray and Baylock.

Baylock's man was unconscious, so they ignored him and began to question the other two. The one with the injured shoulder answered most of the questions in a cringing whine that set Brat's teeth on edge. The other man, lying in the dust, kept a stoical silence for the most part but once or twice interrupted his companion. Yes, they were bandits, highway robbers. No, the Borderers were nowhere near – 'or we'd not be!' said the voice from the ground, grimly humorous. They seemed unaware of any special search going on and Gray was careful to avoid giving them any hint of the reason for this line of questioning. 'There's been hardly any travellers for weeks now,' grumbled the whiner. 'A few big parties well guarded, that's all.'

'Landholders, I suppose,' said Baylock, carefully feeling the man's shoulder. The man groaned loudly. 'It isn't broken,' Baylock told him. He grinned at Graysteel. 'You're badly out of practice, Gray.'

Graysteel shrugged. She was binding up the unconscious man's head. 'You near split this one's skull,' she remarked. 'He'll not wake for hours. These two can't carry him.'

'Not with a broken leg, I can't,' agreed her first victim. He was watching Graysteel warily, puzzled. 'Why should you worry, lad?'

Graysteel glanced indifferently at him and said to Baylock, 'Would it not be kinder to slit their throats?'

'Than leave them for the Borderers to find? Perhaps.' Baylock looked them over. 'This one can walk. I broke that one's arm as well as his head, but when he comes to himself he'll probably be able to get away. I suppose his chances are fair. I don't think you,' to the man with the broken leg, 'have any chance at all.'

Gray slid out her dagger and both the conscious men gasped and shrank away.

'Now, wait just a minute, lad,' urged the one with the broken leg. He was older than the others and his beard was greying. He tried to hitch himself up and groaned slightly as he jarred his leg. 'When my friend here comes to, he'll give me a hand, and so will my other friend. His shoulder isn't so bad he can't give a lift to a mate, is it, now? So you don't need bother about us. We'll be fine, won't we, mate?' The other, cradling his right arm in his left, smiled with great insincerity and said eagerly, 'Yes,

of course! I'll be able to help you just as soon as Last...' he broke off and corrected himself, 'as our friend here wakes up.'

Graysteel looked expressionlessly from one to the other. 'In that case,' she said, 'I'll set your leg. I wasn't going to waste time on it if we had to kill you.'

Neither man spoke. It was so clearly a mere statement of fact and the speaker was so totally indifferent to the effect the words might have on them, that they were left speechless.

Brat was sent off to look for straight lengths of wood, while Baylock rapidly hobbled the ankles of the third man and tied his good arm at an awkward angle to a nearby tree. He complained loudly about the pain in his shoulder, but when Gray picked up her dagger to slice a length of cloth for bindings, he fell abruptly silent.

Brat came back with several branches. The woods bordering the road were plainly avoided, for there was plenty of fallen timber that would have been taken for firewood if anyone lived near. So they were reasonably safe from intruders. Gray and Baylock rapidly whittled two lengths of wood into suitable splints, set the man's leg and bound it in the splints. He made no sound but before they finished, he had fainted. The man Baylock had knocked out was stirring and Brat, noticing, asked, 'Are you going to set his arm? Because he's coming round.'

Gray frowned. 'We can't wait here all night. It's near sunset now. Could you set his arm if we left splints and bandages?' she asked the man tied to the tree. He shook his head violently, looking even more scared at the prospect than he had at Gray's knife.

'We've started. We may as well finish,' said Baylock, resignedly, and reached for another piece of wood to measure it against the arm. Gray, scowling, got down on her knees again. By the time both men, well splinted, had come to, the sun had set.

Gray, fuming, made a fire in a hollow some way inside the forest and they carried the man with the broken leg to lie beside it. The third man, released from his tree, helped the other one along. He was still very dazed and in a good deal of pain from his head as well as his arm. Baylock had removed his weapons before setting his arm and now made him as comfortable as possible but did not offer him any food.

'It would only make him vomit,' he told Brat. 'I was once hit on the head like that and I couldn't keep anything down for several days.'

Gray had named the three men according to their injuries. She asked Leg if he wanted any food. Before Leg could answer, Shoulder pushed himself forward.

‘Fair starving, we are, Lording! Haven’t eaten for days, else we’d never have attacked your Lordships...’ he trailed off as Gray, ignoring him as if he were bodiless, propped Leg up against her pack and handed him a water bottle. Leg drank a little, then nodded to Head. ‘Do you think he can keep a drop of water down?’

‘I’m thirsty,’ began Shoulder and was again ignored. Gray gave Leg an approving glance and handed the water to Head. They all ate, in the end, except Head who had fallen asleep almost at once. Brat, munching one of the pasties they had bought in the village only that noontime, gazed sleepily at their captives and suddenly came wide awake again. Leg was watching Gray and frowning in a puzzled way, as if trying to track down some elusive memory.

Brat glanced hastily round, saw that Baylock was getting up to fetch more firewood and scrambled up as if to help. As soon as they were out of the firelight, Brat whispered, ‘I think Leg is beginning to recognise Gray. Have you ever met him before?’

Baylock shook his head. ‘You may be right, though. Gray merges into a crowd, but on her own she is not easily forgotten. But don’t worry, Brat. We’ll leave as soon as they are asleep. You lie down and sleep awhile. I’ll wake you when we are ready.’

Brat obeyed. It had been a long day.

They had covered a mile or so by moonlight when Gray said, out of a thoughtful silence, ‘I think we made a mistake. I have a feeling I should have slit Shoulder’s throat at least.’

‘But it was Leg who looked as if he knew you!’ protested Brat, shocked and frightened.

‘Oh yes, he knows me,’ agreed Gray casually. ‘But he’ll not talk. He has been a soldier, maybe an under-captain. Did you notice how he took thought for Head? He’s safe enough. Shoulder, though, is another matter. I expect he’ll desert the others quite quickly and if he is taken, as he will be, sooner or later, for he’s none too bright, he’ll talk.’

‘Too late now,’ said Baylock firmly. ‘And all Shoulder knows is that we are eccentric travellers who actually mend what they mar. That won’t help our hunters, if indeed there are hunters still on our trail. All the same,’ he

added, 'it might be wise for you and Brat to revert to wraparounds at our next camp.'

They made camp again at moonset, to sleep an hour or so until daylight.

When they woke to a brilliant morning, Brat, turning out the pack to find the wraparounds, discovered that nearly all their supply of food was missing. Gray had given it to Leg.

'I told him not to let Shoulder see the food, or not all of it,' she said, calmly. 'When Shoulder deserts them, Leg and Head should be able to manage on their own if they are careful.'

Brat thought of the two men, helpless and in pain and said nothing. Baylock, building a minute fire to bake the eggs that remained, smiled ruefully at Gray and said, 'This country is not well peopled and we have a long walk ahead of us. Could you not have kept back a little more bread?'

Gray smiled back. 'We may spot a hare or some other small game along the way. Or we may go hungry for a while. It will not be the first time.'

Baylock shrugged, divided the last loaf into three and began to eat his share. When they set off again, Brat's girdle held a sheathed dagger, Gray had tucked several pebbles into the bloused front of her wraparound and wore the sling wound loosely around her wrist, and Baylock had produced from his pack a small crossbow, in several harmless-looking sections, which he fitted together very rapidly.

It hardly seemed large enough to do any damage but Baylock tucked the tiny bolts belonging to it into his belt and held it ready in one hand. His staff was slung across his shoulders and he had practised getting it into action before they broke camp. He was very quick indeed.

'Are we expecting an attack?' asked Brat, inspecting all this preparation as they walked. Baylock did not reply directly; he glanced at the woods on either side of the road and asked in his turn, 'Have you ever fired a crossbow?'

'No. I've seen them fired at a mark but they were always too heavy for me. And then, Storytellers don't expect to have to fight. My... Weaveword taught me some dagger play and some wrestling tricks, but I don't think he really believed I'd ever need to use them.'

'Very likely not. But now you may need to defend yourself or, at the very least, to hunt. As soon as we come to more open ground, I'll show you how to use this,' promised Baylock.

'So you do expect an attack!' Brat looked all round, worried.

‘That man Shoulder might be following us with a grudge on his mind,’ said Gray. ‘He might not know us again,’ she glanced over at Baylock who was back in his Tallowhair clothes, ‘but where there is one group of robbers, there may be another.’

‘Leg didn’t say there were any others,’ objected Brat.

‘He didn’t,’ agreed Gray, ‘but travellers in large parties hiring guards means that there are robbers to be guarded against. Otherwise the travellers would be wasting their money.’

‘Then shouldn’t we get off the road?’ Brat peered into the clustering bushes dubiously.

‘Not if we wish to move quickly. These woods are full of bogs and thorn thickets that are literally impassable. You could spend all day skirting one thicket only to find another in your path. Everyone must keep to the road; and there, of course, the robbers can find them.’

‘Don’t the robbers have to skirt the thickets and bogs?’ Brat was ready to resent the robbers.

‘They have secret paths through the bogs and they cut hidden paths through the thickets. Given time, we could probably find them, but we have better things to do!’ pointed out Baylock, amused. Brat subsided. Clearly, no matter what the robbers did, Gray and Baylock intended to stick to the road.

One should perhaps, on the whole, feel sorry for the robbers, painfully carving their way through thorny thickets only to encounter Gray’s sling and Baylock’s staff. Brat grinned and stopped worrying.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Just after noon they came to more open country. The woodland drew back, exposing long rolling hills ahead of them, and the bushes near the road thinned out, giving way to grass and bracken and outcrops of stone. A little way off the road they found a hillock that gave a good field of view all around and here they stopped.

‘You and Brat rest for awhile,’ said Gray firmly. ‘You can give her a crossbow lesson later, Baylock. I’ll keep watch for you, then rest while you work.’

The sun was hot and the day peaceful and in a short while Brat had fallen asleep, curled in a ball on the short turf. Presently the sound of voices broke into Brat’s dreams and then, floating up from sleep, the dream turned into Gray and Baylock arguing in low tones.

Brat lay still, for the moment too comfortable to move, and then realised with a shock what Baylock was saying. ‘We have our own work to do, Graycat. Your life is too valuable to risk for one child. Let me go on with Brat when we reach the next town and you go by the Fellowship route.’

‘I gave my word.’ Gray spoke almost indifferently but something in the tone made Brat shiver.

‘You had no right to give your word, Graycat. I’ll...’

‘No!’ Gray still kept her voice down, but the fury in it stopped Baylock dead. ‘I decide where and when and to whom my word shall be given. There shall be no talk of rights. You know me, Bay. You do know me, do you not, Farwalker?’

Brat peered from under one eyelid. Gray was leaning tensely towards Baylock. She looked so dangerous that for a moment Brat half expected to see her turn into a great grey cat. Then she had drawn back and Baylock was rubbing a hand across his face. He was sweating more heavily than the sun’s heat could account for. Brat hastily closed that one eye, then yawned loudly and knuckled both eyes as if just waking.

‘Oh, I fell asleep! Is there still time for my lesson? You should have woken me!’

Gray and Baylock turned smoothly back into their everyday selves. If Brat had really only just woken, she would never have guessed that there had been a frightening quarrel.

Baylock picked up the crossbow. ‘Plenty of time. Gray has fixed up a target for you while you slept. Look.’

Brat gazed at the piece of wood propped against a boulder and objected, ‘It’s a bit big, isn’t it? And very close.’

Baylock’s mouth twitched as if he wanted to smile. ‘The target is man-sized,’ he said firmly. ‘You must learn which are the most vulnerable points and aim for them. This,’ holding up the little bow, ‘has no great range and its bolts are very small, bird bolts, in fact. So, although normally a crossbow is a long-range weapon, with this you must get close and aim very accurately.’

‘Now, first lesson, cranking the bow. Do not crank it before you need it and never, never leave it to get wet. The string will stretch and when you next need it – Phut!’ and he mimed the drooping fall of the bolt.

Brat nodded eagerly and reached for the bow but Baylock had not finished. Before he would let Brat touch it, Baylock explained the mechanism and made Brat repeat back the explanation. Then he explained how to sight on one’s target. At last he let Brat take the little crossbow and crank it up. Then, just as Brat was settling the bow at eye-level to take aim, Baylock suddenly asked, ‘What are you aiming for?’

‘The target!’

‘Which part of the target?’

‘Oh.’ Brat paused. ‘The eye. Or the throat; or perhaps the knee, if I wanted just to disable him.’

Baylock hesitated, a little taken aback. ‘Yes. I see you have thought it out. Very well, try for the face, first.’

The target had the rough outline and features of a face drawn on it in charcoal. Had Gray carried the charcoal from their last fire ready for just this need? wondered Brat, and aimed at one of the smudged-in eyes. The bolt missed. By how much, Brat could not tell. It missed the target altogether.

‘I did something wrong, Baylock. What was it?’

Again Baylock seemed surprised. As though, thought Brat resentfully, he expected me to blame the bow. I'm not a baby!

'You must allow for the smallest breeze with these toys,' Baylock explained. 'With a full-sized bow at this range the wind we have this afternoon would not matter, but your bow has not much power. Try aiming slightly to the right of your target.'

The lesson went on until they ran out of bolts and Brat was sent to search for the several that had gone wide, while Baylock cut out those embedded in the target.

'How did the child do?' asked Gray, uncoiling from her cloak.

Baylock made a wry face. 'All the hits are in the right areas. Brat knows the points to aim for.'

'Will you let Brat carry the crossbow now?' Gray was re-slinging her pack. She did not look directly at Baylock.

Baylock said softly, hurriedly, 'Let the child go with me. I beg you!' then as Brat returned, saying worriedly, 'I can't find the last one anywhere!' he turned away to smile at her.

'Never mind it, Brat, we can't stop to search any longer. I think you might carry the crossbow and bolts in future, but do not even start to wind it unless Gray or I tell you to!'

Brat was enraptured. 'I'll do just as you say. I'll be very careful, I promise!'

Gray paused before they set out again and said very seriously, 'Remember this, Brat. The most dangerous thing you can do with a weapon is to point it at someone when you don't mean to use it.'

Brat frowned. 'How is that dangerous? I don't understand.'

'It is dangerous because your enemy will very likely try to rush you before you, as he thinks, can attack him. If you did not intend to harm him, you will be unready and unready is very often DEAD! Or, if you manage to kill him, it was perhaps quite unnecessary and you may well regret it. It is dangerous for both parties, Brat. Never threaten what you do not mean to perform. Never!'

Gray was so serious that Brat, remembering the overheard quarrel, felt uncomfortably nervous. 'Yes, Gray!' she said, in a dutiful voice, then added hastily, 'I'm a Storyteller. We don't forget!' with such pride that Gray suddenly laughed her silent laugh.

‘Come along then, my Remembrancer!’ she said cheerfully, and set off briskly along the road without further talk.

Once away from the border they had expected to be able to take things more easily, but the fight with the robbers meant that they needed to reach more settled parts as fast as possible. Brat felt, a little guiltily, that the crossbow lesson had used up more time than they could spare. But Baylock laughed at this idea.

‘We all needed a rest and had to keep watch as well. It was the merest good sense to use part of the time to teach you. An investment for the future, indeed. One day you’ll save my life, or Gray’s, with a well aimed quarrel and then we’ll be very glad to have spent the time so profitably!’

‘But I’ll not be with you much longer, surely?’ asked Brat. ‘This is Captal Shire, isn’t it? Are you going to leave me with my father’s mother’s brother, Silkentongue? Great-uncle Silkentongue and his wife Sweetvoice are in the City just now. I’ve never met them but there is a Story about Sweetvoice. When she was young, she was so beautiful that a great Lord fell in love with her and my great-uncle Silkentongue ...’

‘No.’ Baylock broke in on Brat’s nervous chatter. ‘We are not seeking out Silkentongue. As Storyteller of the Joined Lands he is too well known, even were he not lodged in Lady Jewel’s Hold in the City. You must still lie low, child.’

‘I don’t think I have any other relations in Captal Shire.’ Brat felt suddenly hollow and let down. ‘Where are we going then?’

Baylock looked across at Gray. She looked back with the blank expression that always made Brat think of the statue of a lion seen once in the square at Donmas and never forgotten. Graycat was still angry, then. She had not forgiven Baylock. Or... what was it she had called him? Farwalker?

There was a story about a bowman called Farwalker; another of the Stories you only told to a carefully picked audience. He had been given the name of Farwalker because, when little more than a boy, he had been set afoot, naked and with his hands bound, on the Desert of the Great Plain without water or food. He had walked to safety.

The men who had left him to die had been Lord Clearsight’s picked archers and the boy had beaten them in a fair contest. They had resented it. After Farwalker’s escape, every one of them had died of arrow wounds, and all the reports said that they had been incredibly difficult shots...

Lord Clearsight was still alive.

Brat returned with a start to hear Baylock say, 'I'm sorry, Brat, but I think you had better not know exactly where we are going. We shall get you back to your kin within a month, perhaps.'

'Oh, I don't mind,' Brat said hurriedly, longing to ask Baylock about Farwalker. Could Baylock possibly be the boy Farwalker grown up? Brat had always thought of that story as having happened long ago, but of course since Lord Clearsight was not more than fifty years old or thereabouts even now, the story could not be so very old. True, Baylock carried no bow except the little birding crossbow and some archers would not be seen dead with a crossbow, or so Brat had heard. On the other hand, if you did not want people to know you as Farwalker, then it was only sensible not to walk around with a longbow over your shoulder. Not an easy weapon to hide! thought Brat.

'Brat!' Graycat spoke softly and compellingly. 'Look to your left – just beyond that white rock. There is a hare there. Shoot it!'

Brat grabbed a bolt, slipped it into the groove, wound the bow without breaking stride, then stopped, feet apart and body balanced, lifted the crossbow to aiming point and shot.

The hare gave a great leap into the air and fell, twitching. Brat stood open-mouthed, trembling.

'That was not good shooting,' said Baylock, slowly. 'That was Skylost impossible. Whatever made you call such a shot, Gray?'

'I'm calling omens,' said Graycat, quietly.

Brat walked slowly over to pick up the dead hare. As she stood up, she suddenly broke into wild weeping. She clutched the crossbow in one hand and the hare in the other and made no attempt to hide or mop the tears.

CHAPTER EIGHT

‘Brat!’ Baylock was taking the warm limp body from her. Brat shuddered and wept harder. ‘Brat,’ said Baylock again, ‘what is it? Can I help?’

Brat shook her head fiercely. ‘I want my father and I want grandmother and our pony and... and I don’t want to be an omen for Gray!’

‘Oh, Brat, I’m sorry.’ Gray had come up quietly. ‘Let Baylock have the crossbow now. You’ll get the string wet and then what shall I do for omens?’

Brat laughed in the middle of a sob and loosened her clutch.

‘Now,’ said Gray gently, ‘I am to beg your pardon, most humbly. You have been so brave for so long that I forgot how little used you are to danger. Can you forgive me?’

Brat scrubbed her face dry on her sleeve and nodded. ‘Yes, of course. I didn’t mean to be a nuisance.’ She swallowed a last sob and sniffed hard.

‘You are nothing of the sort!’ Baylock sounded fierce.

‘I think,’ said Gray, ‘that we should tell Brat where we are going.’ She smiled as Brat looked up eagerly. ‘We are bound for the City!’

‘Oh!’ breathed Brat. ‘Shall we see the Overlord? How far is it? I’ve never been there but Grandmother Gentle lived there when she was young. She says that there is an avenue with a thousand statues in it. Is it really a thousand? Has anyone ever counted them?’

‘Whoa! Wait for me,’ begged Baylock. ‘Yes, there is an Avenue of a Thousand Statues but I’ve never heard of anyone counting them. Maybe you’ll have time to count them yourself.’

‘It will take us about a week to get there, walking,’ Graycat told her. ‘As to seeing Overlord Strongmind, he is very old now and does not often ride out or even leave the Great House. You are not likely to meet him. But who knows? You may be lucky.’

‘Come, we must be on our way,’ said Baylock. He held out the crossbow. ‘Here you are, Brat.’ Brat hesitated. She looked at Graycat. Graycat looked back and nodded. Brat took the little weapon, swallowed, and walked on.

‘We need food,’ said Gray. ‘We’ll have to put on a show at the next village.’

Baylock opened his mouth and shut it again, a disgusted expression on his face.

Brat gave a watery giggle.

‘I know, if we go hungry, the blame is mine. I gave away our food,’ agreed Graycat. She grinned at them. ‘But there is smoke in that hollow ahead, see? Someone is cooking our lastmeal.’

‘About two miles away,’ said Baylock, peering at it. ‘Just time for us to decide on our act. No juggling tonight. I’m tired, we all are tired and I for one don’t want to drop everything I pick up. I don’t mind a little conjuring, though.’

‘Well, Brat, do you feel able to tell a Tale or two?’ asked Gray. ‘Something with songs that Baylock and I can learn quickly and sing along with you.’

It sounded sensible. ‘Do you know *The Faithful Friends*?’ Brat asked. ‘That has several songs in it but we could change them for songs you know. There’s a sad song about a dead lover and a loud drinking song and one that is a nonsense song. So any song of that type would do.’

‘Well thought of,’ said Graycat. ‘One song for each of us. Will this do for the sad song?’ She stood still and sang,

‘And art thou dead, my only love?
Shall I never see thee more?
I’ll weep for thee, my dearest lad,
Till the sea wear away the shore.
Till the sea wear away the shore.
‘The shore shall wear away, dear love,
And my salt tears fill the sea,
So long my love and grief shall last,
So dear thou hast been to me.
So dear thou hast been to me.’

For a moment nobody spoke. The tune was so sad that the words became heart-rending. Then Brat blinked furiously, Baylock bent to rummage in his pack and Graycat smiled at them both.

Baylock stood up with an odd little pottery whistle, a claysinger, in his hand. He began to practice the tune and Gray sang again. The sweet breathy tone of the claysinger added to the effect.

Brat was pleased. 'That's good!' she announced. 'Now, I can sing the nonsense song and Baylock the drinking song.'

'Do we want the audience to join in?' asked Baylock.

'Yes, why not? It comes right at the end of the Tale so it won't matter if they go on singing and don't want to stop.'

'Then I'll sing *The Three Toasts*,' said Baylock. 'It's known in these parts. They'll like it.'

'That should fit in nicely,' agreed Brat. 'I'll have to change the ending of the Tale just a little but it'll be easy.'

'Is that allowed?' asked Gray.

Brat looked to see if she were teasing but she was perfectly serious. 'Oh, yes. It's only a Tale. It's not true, not like a Story. I couldn't alter a Story, of course. And most especially not one of the Great Cycle. You mustn't change one word of those! Why, the Storytellers' Council argues for weeks if a word has to be altered because no-one understands it any longer.'

'Do you know any of them?' asked Baylock, interested.

'I know some,' said Brat. 'But I shan't be allowed to actually tell any of the Great Stories until I'm seventeen at least!'

'A long time to wait,' said Baylock solemnly. 'Now, after the drinking song, we pass the bowl round and while we do I think we should all sing something cheerful. What shall it be?'

'How about *Bleak Moor*,' suggested Graycat, straight-faced.

Brat stared. 'But that's the gloomiest... Oh, you're laughing at me!'

'Me? Laughing? Never!' Gray turned a hurt look on her. 'Perhaps you'd prefer *The Seven Brothers*?'

Brat and Baylock spluttered with laughter. 'Worse and worse!' Baylock protested. 'Stop it, Gray!'

'*The Oak and the Willow*?'

Brat was too doubled up with giggles to speak but Baylock growled and threatened to strangle Gray.

'I'm only trying to help!' she said reproachfully.

When they got their breath back, Baylock suggested *The Farmer's Daughter* and Brat hastily agreed. It had a rollicking tune and a merry story of a clever country girl and the townsman who thought he could cheat her. They sang it through as they walked to be sure they all knew the words.

As they finished, ‘I still think *Bleak Moor* would...’ began Gray wistfully.

‘Aaagh!’ Baylock screamed and Gray at last broke down in laughter. Brat shook her head, trying not to giggle. Such childish behaviour! You’d think they were ten instead of...

‘How old is Baylock?’ she wondered. ‘How old was Farwalker when he won his Name? Fifteen? Sixteen? The story says he was a boy or a youth. He can’t be very old. Twenty-six or seven, maybe?’

She looked at Farwalker’s dark face. He winked at her and she looked away, flushing. ‘And Gray. How old is she?’ Brat counted in her head. ‘There must be twenty Stories or more about her. She must be thirty at least to have crammed in all those adventures since she left her father’s Hold.’

Some of those Stories ran through her mind. It suddenly seemed impossible that the Graycat who was the granddaughter of Overlord Strongmind’s own sister, who had refused to marry the son of a great Lord and who was a Lady in her own right, could possibly be the same person as the light-hearted woman teasing her.

‘She’s the hero of all those Stories and she asked my advice about what we should do! She made all those jokes because I was crying. She’s promised to bring me to my people at the risk of her life...’ Brat’s thoughts stuttered and stopped.

Baylock and Graycat had stopped too. They were watching Brat in amusement as she stood with her mouth open, staring.

‘Come along, Brat,’ urged Gray. ‘We want our lastmeal if you don’t!’

‘I... oh, yes! Yes, of course, coming!’ said Brat. She set off once more with her head in a whirl.

CHAPTER NINE

The village was actually a very small town called Valley Falls with walls and a real gatehouse. The gates were plainly not very stout, so there were two men guarding the gatehouse and both were reasonably alert.

‘Gray, do you suppose they shut those gates at night?’ asked Brat, as they approached. ‘I’d better be Silverswift here,’ warned Gray. ‘Probably they do. Against robbers and, in winter, against wolves. Why?’

‘I just thought we might want to get out in a hurry.’

‘Quite right,’ agreed Baylock. ‘Always secure your lines of retreat. But we’d hardly need to bother with the gates here. See how some of the houses lean against the town wall? Easy enough to climb out of this town. Climbing in would be harder, of course.’

They strolled peacefully past the guards, who barely glanced at them, and entered the main street. It curled round a corner and delivered them in a very short time to the tiny central town square.

Baylock and Silverswift rapidly gathered an audience and Baylock wandered, apparently at random, among the children, producing a small sweetmeat from an ear here and a nose there and solemnly presenting it to the child concerned. Brat, watching, decided he was mainly picking those children who had a mother or elder sister in the audience.

Presently he began producing scarves and bangles. These he draped over Silverswift’s shoulder or slid onto her wrist in a casual manner that made Brat, who had not yet caught him actually pulling anything from sleeve or pocket or pouch, watch him still more closely and suspiciously.

Even so Baylock took everyone, including Brat, by surprise when he passed a hand over the scarves on Silverswift’s shoulder and then lifted them by the corner of the topmost to reveal them all knotted together in a long line.

Baylock bowed to the applause and introduced Brat. By now Brat felt quite happy and confident. This cheerful crowd was Storyteller territory and Brat was a Storyteller. There was nothing to worry about. *The Faithful Friends* was an old favourite, but the songs seemed to be new to this

audience and Silverswift actually drew tears from one susceptible girl with *And Art Thou Dead*. Baylock's drinking song had half the crowd joining in and then while Silverswift made the round of their audience with the bowl, they sang *The Farmer's Daughter*, Brat taking the girl's lines and Bay the man's and all three singing the chorus and narrative. There were enough coppers to provide lastmeal, beds for the night and, with Brat's hare, meals for the next two days.

Next morning Brat felt disinclined to get up. The bed in the inn, although it was not as comfortable as some, was clean and not too lumpy and this morning, very desirable. Brat's head ached and the early sun seemed much too bright. But she dragged herself out and they set off again.

When they stopped for the noonmeal halt, Brat was suddenly sick at the side of the road. She sat down in the grass, shivering and trying not to cry. Gray was worried. She felt Brat's forehead and asked Baylock if he knew how far it might be to the next town.

'About as far as we've already come today,' he said. 'There's no point in going back. We might as well go on.' So they went on, taking it in turn to help Brat along. After a while Brat had to be carried. She was only vaguely aware of being lifted, passed after a time from Baylock to Gray and, after a shorter interval, back to Baylock. The motion led to being sick, which meant being put down for a little while and given water, which was promptly vomited back.

Then the misery began again.

The headache that had been pressing against Brat's skull all day reached the point at which it became necessary to hold it in with both hands. When Brat began muttering deliriously, Gray stopped.

'We can't go any further like this,' she announced. 'We must halt and let Brat rest. I could do with a rest myself, and you must be even more tired, Bay. Put the child down here,' she was pulling a blanket from her pack as she spoke, 'and we'll make camp.'

When Brat awoke from fever-dreams, sometime in the night, Gray was sitting beside the bed of fir branches, the light from a small fire outlining her profile. Brat's mouth was too dry for speech but at the first faint croak Gray was leaning forward to offer water. Brat drank eagerly, and whispered, 'I'm sorry, Gray. Have I held you up badly?'

Gray smiled reassuringly. 'Since our business is to get you to safety, child, you may set your own pace.'

'But you said... no, Baylock said, about your work... and we're going to the City but, you said, not to Great-uncle Silkentongue... shall you be obliged to go by the Fellowship route now, Gray?'

There was a pause. Then Graycat said slowly, almost dreamily, 'Where did you hear of the Fellowship, Brat?'

With a shock Brat remembered. That had been part of Gray's quarrel with Baylock. Gray had no idea that there had been a listener.

Brat tried to sound calm. 'I heard you and Baylock arguing about me when I was just waking up. I thought you'd rather I didn't know, so I pretended not to. Baylock said you ought to go by the Fellowship route.'

'I see. Do you think you could forget that you ever heard the name?' said Gray, very gently. 'I know it is not easy for a Storyteller to forget things, but we shall all be much safer if you do.'

Brat swallowed hard. 'It is forgotten. My father's name for me was Brook. I swear by my name...'

'Hush, child!' Gray slid a hand over Brat's mouth. 'No need for that! Your word is good, Brook Storyteller.' She smiled, and added casually, 'Farwalker will be glad you are feeling better.'

Brook said anxiously, 'Is he really Farwalker?'

'Oh, yes. I see you know the story. Weaveword's daughter would know it, of course.'

'And I asked if there were any Stories about him!' remembered Brook, shocked at her own blindness. Gray gave a small amused snort, set the water-bottle near Brook's hand and rolled herself up in a blanket to sleep.

CHAPTER TEN

Next day, Brook insisted that she was well enough to go on. But by mid-morning, when they reached the next town, she was dizzy and sick again, shivering one minute, burning the next. Gray and Baylock brought her to one of the three inns in this flourishing market town. They chose the one that was clearly going up in the world.

‘The innkeeper here will be too busy to pay us much heed,’ explained Baylock, watching Brook’s pale face anxiously, although his voice was perfectly normal. ‘Never use an inn with only a few guests if you can avoid it. The landlord will have leisure to observe you, and the guests will take notice of you.’

‘The child is worn out,’ said Gray. ‘Leave the lecture for now. Listen, Brook. You must not appear ill or we’ll get no room here. Try to stand straight and walk beside me. I’ll shield you as much as possible. Be Brat for a little longer!’

So Brat, holding herself stiffly upright and clutching Gray’s hand, followed Baylock into the Frolicksome Filly. They got one small room between them. Three straw mattresses on the floor, a chair and a washstand made up the furnishings, but Brat did not care what the room was like, if it would only stop swinging round her. She collapsed on to the nearest mattress and let the fever take her.

She slept, half-woke to find Gray or Baylock beside her, drank whatever they offered and slept again. At last she came properly awake to voices outside the closed door. Gray was standing by the door, her hand on the latch, listening intently.

‘Landlord,’ Baylock was saying in a gentle voice, ‘how do you like to be called?’

‘Fillbowl,’ snapped the other voice crossly, ‘as you well know and what of it?’

‘I felt I should get it right,’ explained Baylock, still more gently, in a cream-smooth voice, quite unlike his usual one. Brook saw Gray stiffen at

his tone. She slowly eased the door open a crack and Fillbowl's voice came to them clearly.

'Why? What d'you mean, man?'

'The Storytellers,' said Baylock. 'They will want to know what to call the man who murdered the only child of one of their Lords. The Storytellers have an Overlord, you know, The Storyteller, who is acknowledged the greatest Storyteller of his time; and this child's great-uncle is *The Storyteller*.

'When the child dies, he will want to know which landlord it was who threw the child out of his inn to die in the street.

'The Storytellers will wish to put him and his inn into their Tales. For example, in *The Tale of The Magic Ass*, when the wicked landlord substitutes his ass for the magic one, a Storyteller might explain that this landlord was not as vile as Fillbowl of the Frolicksome Filly. Or when they tell *Beltann and Beltanno* they might point out how much better was the inn where the brothers were half-suffocated and nearly poisoned than the Frolicksome Filly in Fourtree town.

'I mention these as the merest examples,' he went on, smiling at the slowly purpling Fillbowl. Gray had gradually widened the crack until the door was now half open. Brat could see Baylock over Fillbowl's shoulder. The thought crossed her mind that she would not care to face that smile herself.

Baylock added, even more gently, 'I am sure the Storytellers can think of many, many more. Why, you may end up as a catch-phrase: 'As frightful a failure as Fillbowl', say, or how about 'The *Foundered Mare* follows the *Frolicksome Filly*'?'

'You wouldn't dare!' gasped the landlord furiously. 'Why, you're nothing but vagabonds. I'll have you thrown in jail. I'll tell the guards that you tried to blackmail me! I'm a well-known citizen...'

'Why, Fillbowl,' Gray said sweetly at his shoulder. The man started violently. 'Don't you want to be famous? I daresay by this time next year there will be crowds coming to your inn... not to stay, of course, but to stare and jeer. I shouldn't think many will actually throw things at you.'

'I'm calling the guards!' hissed Fillbowl, his eyes bulging.

'Mmm? To tell them about the smuggled wine in your second cellar?' asked Gray, interested.

‘How did you find out...?’ began Fillbowl, as pale suddenly as he had been purple. He bit off the sentence and stared, baffled, at Gray and Baylock. ‘All this fuss about a streetskimmer,’ he mumbled, resentfully.

‘About a sick child!’ Gray corrected him. Her voice was iron hard. She came back into the room and closed the door with a snap.

‘Could he really have you put in prison?’ whispered Brook.

‘Of course not! He was bluffing,’ Gray assured her. ‘Lie down and rest, child. We were not bluffing, however. We should have seen to it that he was ruined, wiped out completely. Once your people knew that he was ready to throw you out, he would be finished.’

‘But what about anyone who wasn’t a Storyteller?’ asked Brook. ‘Suppose I had really been a streetskimmer?’

‘Do you think your family would care about a streetskimmer?’ asked Gray, with a curiously expectant look.

‘Yes. Yes, of course they would!’ Brat was positive. ‘Only they wouldn’t know, would they?’

‘Do you know the story of *The Evil Lady of Force Hold*?’ asked Gray, seemingly at random.

Brat stared, faintly affronted. ‘Of course I do!’

‘What happened to her?’

‘She was very wicked and the Overlord who ruled then heard of it and she was tried and put to death and all her land-holdings went to a cousin,’ summarised Brat rapidly.

‘How do you think the Overlord got to hear of it?’

Brat paused and frowned, puzzled. ‘The Story says,’ she began, *At last this Lady’s cruelty passed all bounds and she stole a child, the son of poor peasants, and beat him to death, not for punishment, for he had done no wrong, but for her mere pleasure. Then the story of her wickedness went far and wide over the land until it came to the ears of the Overlord’s daughter...*

‘And she arranged a show for her father,’ finished Gray, ‘to let him know what was going on. But how, Brook, did the story spread?’

‘Oh! I see!’ exclaimed Brook, suddenly enlightened. ‘We Storytellers spread it! But the story doesn’t say that.’

‘The Lords know the power of the Storytellers,’ said Gray, ‘there is no need to rub their noses in it! Remember, Brook Storyteller, the Storytellers could bring down the Overlord himself if they ever felt they had cause.’

‘But we wouldn’t!’ said Brook, shocked.

‘Not this Overlord,’ agreed Graycat. ‘It happened once, though, long ago.’

Brook was only half listening. A sudden thought had struck her. ‘Gray... My father... Will the Storytellers..?’

‘Avenge him? Bring down Lord Eaglon? Yes!’ Gray’s smile was almost a snarl. ‘By now, thanks to your memory, Brat, at least three of your folk’s families will have heard of Weaveword’s murder. They will spread the news so fast and so far that there will be no stopping it. That is why Lord Eaglon’s soldiers were searching for you. He was and still is desperate to keep Weaveword’s death a mystery, even if, by now, he must know it is no longer a secret.’

‘I did know he wanted to keep it quiet,’ said Brook, slowly, ‘but I didn’t understand why. Now I see.’ She drew a long shuddering breath. ‘My father...’ and broke off to bury her head in her blanket and weep for Weaveword.

All along she had refused to let herself think about her father’s death, had sought no reasons for it nor for her own danger. Now at last she could allow herself to grieve properly.

Presently she was aware that Gray was talking softly. ‘You’ll feel well again tomorrow, Brook. Baylock is trying to find us some horses so that you’ll not get tired.’ She paused and added tartly, ‘If indeed there be any but scrubs in this miserable town!’

Brat had almost stopped crying. Now she hiccupped and said in a watery voice, ‘A donkey cart would be nice. I like donkeys.’

‘Now that,’ said Gray, pleased, ‘is a good idea! I’ll ask Baylock to look out for one. Rest again. I’ll bring you some food shortly. The cook here is my friend now.’ She smiled at Brat, adding, ‘Always flatter the cook!’

‘Is that how you knew about the secret cellar and the smuggled wine?’ asked Brat, snuggling down again.

‘Oh, no.’ Gray was stifling a giggle. Her eyes shone with suppressed amusement. ‘I’ll tell you a truth. Four innkeepers out of five this close to the border will have smuggled wine tucked away somewhere; and most of them have a hidden cellar to keep it in. I was guessing!’

Brat found herself laughing helplessly. Gray’s enjoyment of her own game of bluff and counter-bluff was infectious. Without thinking, Brat suddenly blurted out, ‘You are not like any Lady I ever saw, Gray!’ It was

something that had been on her mind for days, though why it should burst out at this moment, she did not know. Immediately she clapped a hand to her mouth in horror. 'I'm sorry! I beg your pardon! I don't know why I...'

Gray gave her a wry smile and said, 'I know what you mean, child. Well, to start with, I was not brought up like most Ladies. My father had me taught many more weapon skills than women usually learn. I was taught sword play as well as dagger play, the longbow and the cavalry bow as well as the crossbow. I even learnt to use a quarterstaff and a sling, which very few Lords can use, and certainly no Ladies!'

'Why did your father teach you all the things Ladies don't usually learn?'

'He had no other heir. My mother died in childbirth when I was three years old and the babe with her. After her death my father, for a while, sought death himself; or so I was told, later. He rode unbroken horses, hunted wild boar alone and on foot and, when the war with Westfold came, flung himself into it. Well, he got his wound. It did not kill him but it left him crippled and unable to sire more children.'

'So, I must be his son. It is not so very unusual for an only daughter to be brought up as the heir. But my father took it a little further than most. Until I was sixteen, I hardly knew I was a girl! Then I was sent to Court for a year.' She smiled, reminiscently. 'That was – strange.' She paused for a moment, still smiling, and shook her head. 'Then, when I was just seventeen, he suddenly decided on a Lord for me. And we parted company.'

She fell silent, staring at a spider busily spinning its web across the door frame.

'Poor wretch, you've wasted all your work!' she said with a wry smile; rose, carefully caught the spider by one long leg and dropped it out of the window. Brat watched in silence as Gray walked the few paces across the room and back, wiping the web's stickiness from her fingers.

'Could I learn to sling like you?' Brat asked. Gray looked surprised but said, 'You have a good eye. I don't see why not. But it takes a great deal of practice to do well; and even at the best it is not so accurate nor so deadly as the bow.'

'Yes, but you can hide it so easily,' pointed out Brat, eagerly. 'It's the perfect weapon for someone who is supposed to be unarmed!'

‘Storytellers do not bear arms,’ Gray reminded her. ‘And you are a Storyteller, Brook. Think carefully before you take up a weapon.’

Two days later, they set out again.

Baylock had found not a donkey cart but a donkey sled. Brook was delighted. She had seen these sleds before in country areas, used for carrying hay or other crops from hilly fields, and had always thought it would be fun to ride on one. They could travel where a wheeled cart could not and the idea of sliding over fields and between bushes seemed alluring. They were always painted in gay colours and some of them had a sort of hood, like that on a baby’s crib, carved into strange shapes and intended to keep the hay dry in rainy weather.

The one Baylock had bought was painted a very deep red and had a pattern of grasses painted up the sides and over the hood. Brat thought it enchanting and fell in love with the donkey that was to pull it, a small brown jenny with an appealing expression.

It did not take long to discover that the donkey’s expression was misleading. She had a whim of iron. And the sled, which was totally without springs, was bruisingly uncomfortable to ride in. Jolted violently about, Brat barely had breath enough to beg Baylock, who was leading the donkey, to stop.

‘I’ll walk; I can’t bear this!’ she gasped when Gray peered round the hood’s edge to see what was the matter.

Graycat was worried. ‘You mustn’t get too tired,’ she said. ‘I think the going will be easier once we get off the ruts in this road. As soon as we reach the hills yonder, we can cut you a heather mattress. But you will certainly have to walk for now.’

‘With our packs on the sled we can carry Brat if she gets too weary,’ said Baylock. ‘No wonder you hardly ever see anyone riding on these contraptions!’ He grinned at Brat who scowled and rubbed her bruises tenderly as they set off again.

By the time they had reached the hills and could cut enough heather to make Brat a springy mattress, she was quite desperately tired. She said nothing about it but set her teeth and trudged on, unaware that she was moving more and more slowly and that Baylock and Graycat were exchanging anxious looks. As soon as the heather had been covered by a blanket, Brook was told firmly to lie down upon it, Gray led the donkey

gently forward and, the jolting muted by the smoother going and by the heather mattress, Brook fell into an exhausted sleep.

Three days later Brat was so obviously recovered that they sold the sled and went on with the donkey carrying their packs and, from time to time, Brat as well. Gray and Baylock gave little shows now and then, allowing Brat to do some singing but not to tell Tales.

They were all back in male clothing. The dye had partly worn off Brat's skin, so she was now Tallowhair's young half-brother, while Graysteel was Brat's mother's brother, should anyone ask. Tallowhair addressed Graysteel politely in public as 'Brother of my father's wife', but Brat had a silly fit of calling Graysteel 'Bro'mo' as some country folk did, instead of 'Uncle' or the more formal, Storyteller style, 'Brother of my mother'. Gray very quickly grew tired of this and after one warning, simply upended Brat and spanked her once, hard.

It was a very subdued Brat who trailed up a slight rise a little later to find Graysteel and Tallowhair waiting, looking pleased.

'There it is! the City!' called Tallowhair, with a broad gesture encompassing half the horizon.

Brat gasped. The City was huge, filling the whole river island below them and spilling out onto the far bank to lip up at the tall hills beyond. Immediately below them were gardens and orchards, then the outwall cottages and small houses clustered along the road, then the river and, rising out of the river, the walls – so high! marvelled Brat – and the City proper.

A thin cloud of dust and smoke from cooking fires hung over the City, for the day was windless. The sun, nearing the horizon, gilded the hazy air. The City hung in a golden bubble, like a dream, unreal as one of Harvest's backcloths with a gauze curtain veiling it.

Brat stood at gaze, marvelling, and her friends let her alone awhile.

Presently Gray said, 'Brat! We must go now. We shall stay the night at that farm down there. See the one near the mill, with the green door? Friends of mine live there. Come along, child.'

Reluctantly, Brat left the view and followed them along the path beside the swift mill stream hurrying down to join the river.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Two or three hours before dawn, Brat woke with a terrified start. Gray was shaking her. Before Brat could speak, Gray's hand had covered her mouth.

'Listen, then do just as I say,' she breathed in Brat's ear. 'There are armed men all round the house. Here are your clothes. There is a trap door to the roof. Get up on to the roof and stay there till we come, which will be when the soldiers are gone. If we do not come, wait until daylight and then go to the City. Go to Silkentongue at the house of the Lady Jewel and tell him you must speak with the Overlord.'

'Shush! Yes, I mean it! Silkentongue can arrange it. You may tell Silkentongue anything he asks about Weaveword, but nothing else. Tell the Overlord anything he asks! Even what I told you to forget.'

All the while she was speaking, Gray had been hurrying Brat into her clothes, pushing her arms into the sleeve-holes of her wraparound, fastening her belt and finally slipping the strap of a small pack over her shoulder.

Now she whispered, 'Repeat what you are to do,' and Brat obeyed, word for word. Gray made Brat climb up to her shoulder and guided her to a tiny trapdoor, set flush with the ceiling, invisible unless you knew where to look.

'Go! There is a crawl space between ceiling and roof, and another trapdoor just above you to the tiles. Don't make a sound!'

Then, as Brat scrambled from her shoulders into the cramped space above, she added, 'Good fortune attend you, Brook Storyteller!' thrust Brook's blanket through the hole after her and reached to shut the trap door.

'And you, too, Silverswift,' whispered Brook; and wondered why she had picked that one of Gray's names. Gathering up the blanket and fumbling cautiously for the door to the roof, she tried to divert her mind from fear by considering the matter.

'I think I was telling Gray to slip into her actress self,' she thought. 'But it is not your business, Brook-Brat Storyteller,' she told herself

severely as she struggled out onto the tiles, 'to tell Graycat what to do!'

All the same, if Gray were captured, it could be good advice.

She lay down on the flat central part of the roof. She had the blanket wrapped around her so that she could easily throw it off and get up in a moment if she had to. Then she began to wonder. Gray had said armed men. Were they soldiers? Or perhaps they were bandits. But so close to the City? Surely not! No, they must be soldiers; but whose? Lord Eaglon's? Most probably he had lost track of them many days ago and many miles away. But there were those three bandits in the forest. Suppose that the one Gray called Shoulder had in fact been captured and had talked? He could have described Gray, Farwalker and herself. The skills Graycat and Farwalker had exercised to defeat their attackers were noteworthy and would have been much on Shoulder's mind. All this could have been known to the Borderers or to Lord Eaglon a day or two after they had defeated the outlaws.

'And I delayed them by being ill!' groaned Brook to herself. 'That innkeeper, too, in Fourtree. He was too scared to throw us out, but if soldiers asked him about us, he'd talk, gladly. He must hate Gray and Farwalker for frightening him so.'

She listened, straining her ears for any sound and gradually realised that the night was full of stealthy movement. A soft creaking sounded here, over there a very faint snapping sound, followed by a scraping almost instantly stilled; even, she thought, breathing.

Then, with terrifying abruptness, someone banged on the farmhouse door. Brat bit her tongue sharply as she jerked, startled. She checked the movement at once, remembering Gray's orders, and lay still, trying not to shiver.

All her senses, stretched to their utmost, could not make out what was happening. The banging had been followed by a confused muttering, then there was a sharp exclamation... surprise? anger? Brat could not tell. After that came a general stir, apparently throughout the farmhouse. Were the soldiers searching it? There was no sound of breakages or slamming doors such as you might expect of soldiers searching. Pressed flat against the tiles, Brat thought she could feel a sort of vibration as if the whole house were quivering. But that was obviously absurd.

'I'm imagining it,' she told herself. 'Oh, Graycat! Farwalker! What is happening?'

She swallowed the blood from her bitten tongue, now badly swollen, and held onto her courage as hard as she could. And waited.

Suddenly there was a shout from outside the house and a rush out of doors by the searchers. A babble of question and answer rose. Brat gathered that someone had slipped out of the house and through the cordon of men surrounding it. Whoever it was would now be pursued by the entire party. Surely that must have been Graycat! Who else could evade so many so easily? But why had the guards even seen her?

‘She let herself be seen to decoy the soldiers away from the farm so that we could escape!’ Brat almost spoke aloud in her excitement, then, remembering that the soldiers might not all have gone yet, she lay quiet, waiting for Farwalker to fetch her...

Brat and Farwalker stood uneasily by the roadside nearest the mill. Here the tracks of the soldiers showed bunched and trampled where they had sought Graycat in the darkness. Graycat had not returned by dawn and with the growing daylight Farwalker and Brat must set out to track her.

‘Whose men were they?’ Brat asked. Farwalker looked at her with respect. That was the key question and on the answer must depend their movements.

‘They were not Lord Eaglon’s men,’ he said. ‘That I’m sure of. They were searching for an adult, not a child. They never once looked in any place too small for a full-grown man or woman. Beyond that, I can’t tell.

‘Our host says that they wore no insignia and used no names. Their captain called them by number, not by name! They were careful to do no damage, they made no threats, offered no bribes but simply shut him and his family into one room and searched. Thoroughly.’

Brook’s immense store of Tales and Stories, her Storyteller habit of looking for underlying motives, made her say, ‘An illegal search, then, unauthorised. Someone does not want anybody to know. They did no harm so that no-one would bother to follow up any complaint the farmer may make. They are hiding from someone; but who?’

Farwalker looked over his shoulder, looked the other way, hesitated and then said, ‘Let us try to follow a little further. The tracks will soon be blotted out if they kept to the road but we just might be lucky and get some idea of which way they went.’

‘If Graycat has escaped them, where will she go?’ asked Brat as they set off, peering in the dim light at the trampled ground.

‘To a meeting place we have in the City,’ Farwalker told her. ‘Or to a place where our friends will look for markers, to leave hers to let us know she is safe.’

It was not long before they lost the trail. A flock of sheep being driven to market had wiped out all sign and although they cast up and down along the road’s verges, they could find no traces of Graycat or her pursuers. Defeated, they sat down under a hedge by the roadside to discuss their next move.

Brat was all for making straight for the meeting place but Farwalker frowned.

‘You said she would go there,’ Brat pointed out, impatiently.

‘Yes. But I am not quite sure that I should take you there,’ said Farwalker. ‘There are things it is better for you not to know, Brook Storyteller, and other things I may not tell you for my oath’s sake. What did Gray tell you to do if we were both captured?’

Brook repeated Gray’s instructions to seek out Silkentongue. Then she hesitated. Had Gray meant her to tell Farwalker anything more?

‘Yes, of course,’ he was saying, ‘Your great-uncle would look after you.’

Brook decided to feel her way. ‘Is he one of the Fellowship?’ she asked, innocently.

Farwalker stared at her. ‘Who told you of the Fellowship?’ he demanded, shocked.

‘You spoke once of going by the Fellowship way. I heard, and told Gray I had heard. She told me to forget it,’ said Brook. ‘She took my word that I would forget. But I can talk of it to you, surely?’

Farwalker’s mouth opened. He made a gulping noise and shut it.

‘I spent a lot of time thinking about it, last night,’ Brook told him. ‘I think that the Fellowship acts as a counterweight to the Landholders and their armed men in some way. And I think that there are lots of people in it, farmers and innkeepers and those who travel around, especially the Actors and the Storytellers. I believe Weaveword my father was one and that he died because he would not break his oath of silence.’

She paused, looking questioningly at him. Farwalker still stared at her in silent amazement. On the road beyond them a flock of geese driven by

two shrill small girls went by, and a group of country women with bundles and baskets balanced on their heads. Farwalker seemed not to notice them. He shook his head, blinking, like one blinded by sudden sunlight.

‘Brat,’ he said, in a strained voice, ‘that is the best-kept secret in the Joined Lands. I had forgotten that memory of yours, Storyteller. Sky and Stars! You are in such danger now... You’re a brave child, Brat, but if you were put to the question now!’ and he shuddered.

Brat, who had been preening herself on her cleverness, felt a clutch of panic. Then she knew what to do. It would not help her if she were ever taken and questioned, but it might help Graycat and Farwalker. Very pale, she reached out and clasped Farwalker’s hand.

‘I swear by my Name,’ she said, as steadily as she could, ‘that I will never speak of this nor convey it in any manner to any person without leave.’ She paused. Her throat seemed to have closed up. She had to choke out the rest of the tremendous oath.

‘May I live Nameless else.’

CHAPTER TWELVE

The solemn oath, the most serious and binding it was possible to give, seemed to Brat to strengthen her. But Farwalker looked as though he had seen a ghost.

‘Child, you know the words. May the Sky and Stars forbid that you should ever know the reality,’ he said heavily.

‘I am not a child!’ snapped Brat. ‘Twelve years is nearly grown up! How old were you when you won your name, Farwalker? I can keep my oath, if I have to, for as long as my father kept his!’

There was a long pause. Farwalker put his hands across his eyes and, thus blindfolded, said, ‘I thought you younger.’

Then he let his hands fall, got briskly to his feet and pulled Brat to hers. ‘You were right. We’ll go to the meeting place.’ He set off along the road. ‘I think better on my feet. Help me to reason it out, Brat. We know that the soldiers sought either Graycat or myself, or both. So they were not Eaglon’s men. They might belong to any of the Lords who know of and oppose the Fellowship. But how would they know we were there? No-one but ourselves knew we were coming to the City. In fact, if Gray had not wanted to show you that particular view of the City, we would not have followed this road at all.’

Brat looked up, startled. ‘You mean that her kindness to me has trapped her?’

‘No! Of course not.’ Farwalker shook his head, frowning in thought. ‘It must be that all the approaches to the City were watched. And that argues some personal motive, but whose? And why just now?’

‘Could some message calling Graycat to the City have been intercepted?’ suggested Brook. ‘Or perhaps something has happened that would certainly bring her here as soon as she got word of it?’

Farwalker stopped dead. ‘Yes! That’s it! Brat, you have hit upon it. News that would draw her to the City... Now I wonder...’ He stood staring into the distance until Brat, hopping with impatience, tugged at him anxiously.

‘What is it? What have you thought of? Baylock!’

He blinked at her as if surprised to find her still there. ‘While you were ill, did Graycat ever tell you how she came to leave her home and kindred?’ he asked abruptly.

Brook was bewildered at the sudden change of subject. ‘Not really,’ she said, uncertainly. ‘Mostly it was Stories about when she was very young. But I do know because in *The Story of Quicksilver Graycat...*’ She hesitated, but Baylock nodded and she went on, ‘...it says that her father, Ironmind, wished her to become the Lady of another Lord’s son; but she would not, he being a nothing.

‘So then Lord Ironmind in great anger would have forced her to do his will. He locked the Lady Quicksilver in a haunted tower in the midst of a great wood until fear and hunger should have weakened her.’ Brook was falling into the Storyteller cadence as the story came back to her in her father’s words. ‘But little reckoned that Lady of ghosts or of locks and bars. That same night, while the guards left by the Lord her father huddled beside a great fire, fearing to look over their shoulders lest they see some spectre, she slipped between the bars at her window. At peril of her neck she climbed down the side of the tower, which being so old, offered her boldness sufficient hand and footholds.

‘And thus began her Use-name of Cat; for not one of Lord Ironmind’s men, when morning came and they found their Lady gone, could credit that mortal woman had made such a descent. Only a cat could have got safely down, they claimed.’ Brook stopped and, still puzzled, looked up at her companion.

‘You tell it well, Brat,’ he said. ‘But do you remember the name of the Lord’s son to whom Graycat was to be Lady?’

‘That is not in the story, neither his name nor his father’s. Why?’

‘I think they were his men who searched for us last night. He inherited his father’s Holdings some years ago and is called Lord Freeforest from the greatest of those Holdings. But his Use-name is Freetongue. He cannot keep a secret and is known for the greatest gossip and the loosest tongue in the Joined Lands. Who more likely to insist on such secrecy that his captain must call his men by numbers, not by name!’

‘You mean he would overdo it out of sheer anxiety?’ Brat stifled a giggle. ‘But why just now? He can’t have spent the last ten or eleven years lying in wait for Graycat!’

‘No. He could never have kept it a secret for so long,’ agreed Baylock, amused. ‘It is my thought that Gray’s father, Lord Ironmind, has perhaps died, recently. He disowned his daughter for her disobedience, but he could not disinherit her. Only the Overlord can do that and he has never permitted it, not even when she was outlawed. So she is still her father’s Heir, and as soon as she heard of his death, she would come to the City to claim her inheritance at the hands of the Overlord. If Freetongue could capture her and force her to become his Lady, he would possess all her father’s Holdings as well. Or so he would believe.’

The last words were spoken so grimly that Brook felt a shudder run through her. She had a momentary image of Graycat smiling, with a bloodstained knife in her hand. She blocked it off and said briskly, ‘We don’t yet know anything for certain. Let’s hurry. Graycat is probably wondering why we are taking so long!’

The first meeting place they made for was no more than a shack where someone’s donkey was kept. There was a recess above the doorway, very low and deep. Farwalker peered into this and felt about. There was nothing there and he drew out his empty hand saying, with attempted cheerfulness, ‘I’ll leave my own token; our friends must be told I am in the City.’

He found a smooth pebble and scratched on it a stick figure walking with great strides. This was put carefully at the back of the niche. ‘Any of our friends finding it will know that I am here and where to look for me,’ he told Brat. ‘Now there is one other place to leave a message, and then we shall go to the inn where Gray will expect to find us, and have a meal.’

They trudged through noisy narrow streets smelling powerfully of old meat, stale bodies and sewage, gradually working uphill to a pleasanter quarter, with less powerful smells. Presently Farwalker stopped outside an amazing shop that seemed to have exposed for sale everything in the world that could be picked up in one hand. There were hats and aprons, balls and dolls, a meat cleaver, pans of all sizes, daggers and crossbows, stools, wooden plates and pottery plates, silver, tin and wooden spoons, peacock feathers, wigs, fans, birdcages and wine flasks.

Brat noticed a wooden figure of a deer, beautifully carved, on a peculiar stand which was, she suddenly realised, a cooking pot turned upside down. A curiously curved sword lay on a fine woollen blanket across a toy whirligig, while a stack of leather jugs had a baby’s woolly ball in the

topmost one and a string of delicate crystal beads was slung around the handle of a bucket filled with reels of sewing thread.

‘Thunder! How does the owner ever find anything?’ she asked, staring bemusedly around.

‘Oh, Gather can lay her hand on anything anyone asks for,’ said Farwalker.

He picked up a handbell and rang it three times, then, after a brief pause, once more. Then he set it down again and shooed Brook out of the shop and on down the street. They had seen no-one in the shop at all.

Ten paces further along Farwalker suddenly stopped and spun round. Brook, who had also heard the hurrying footsteps behind them, flattened herself against the wall. She peered up anxiously, expecting anything from an escaping thief to an attack by armed men. Then her mouth opened in soundless amazement. It was Gray! Alive, unhurt, alight with relief and pleasure.

They went on down the street together as soberly as they could.

‘I went back to the farm,’ explained Gray, ‘to find you and pick up my pack, only to learn that you had left an hour before. It had taken me longer than I expected to throw off the pursuit. They were very determined! So I set off for the first rendezvous, found Farwalker’s marker and left my own, set off for the second rendezvous and was just about to visit Gather when I saw you.’

‘We’d almost given you up,’ admitted Farwalker. ‘Brat was sure you were safe but even she was very quiet...’

‘I was simply a little overwhelmed by the City,’ said Brat loftily, hugging Gray’s arm. She let go a moment later, knowing that Graycat must always have her hands free.

‘Never, never hinder my right arm,’ Graycat had warned her once. ‘Or Baylock’s either. You can die in two seconds and it might take twice that time to get a hand clear if someone is too close.’

So Brook, almost bursting with relief and happiness, moved carefully clear of Gray’s arm.

Farwalker was explaining, rather hesitantly, his theory of their hunters’ identity. Gray saw the implications at once. ‘You think my father is dead?’ she asked, sobering rapidly.

‘If I’m right that they sought you, not me or Brat.’

‘You are right. I heard some of their talk. They nearly trod on me once,’ said Gray, smiling thinly, ‘and they very certainly sought a woman, not a child or a man. So, then, it seems my father is dead. Yes. I have seen him but once in ten years, and then at a distance. He would not, I think, have recognised me.’

She walked on, looking about her alertly as usual, but Brook thought that she was more tired than she would admit. She always looked younger in male clothing, but today there were fine lines across her forehead and the laughter wrinkles round her eyes were merely wrinkles.

Brook said innocently, ‘Are we still going to that inn? I’m starving with hunger!’ To her relief, it made Graycat smile again.

They went to the inn and were welcomed by Comfort, the inn’s owner. She was a sweet-faced plump woman who was, so Farwalker murmured to Brook, the kindest-hearted, the most generous and the most talkative woman in the whole City.

‘She knows all that happens, passes it on to anyone and everyone, wouldn’t hurt a fly. But she has no discretion. Ask her no questions, or the next comer will hear just what questions you asked and what answers you got.’

Brook examined Comfort as she hurried to fetch them food and drink, calling back over her shoulder to another guest and at the same time pushing a large cat gently out of her way.

‘Then she is very dangerous,’ she remarked thoughtfully.

Gray’s head turned sharply. She had been scanning the room warily for watchers, idlers, anything suspicious. Now her full attention was on Brook. ‘I think you have learned more than I intended or wished to teach you, Brat,’ she said, rather sadly.

Farwalker said hastily, ‘I only meant that you must guard your tongue in front of her. You would do that anyway, of course. And she is very useful. It’s just... well, she is such a cascade!’ His hapless expression made Brat laugh. Comfort, returning, served out their soup, with inquiries as to Brat’s parentage, destination, age and abilities mingled with prophecies of an early grave for Swift, as she called Graycat.

‘I can tell!’ she said. ‘You’ve been out on the tiles all night, young man.’

‘Tell us the latest City news, Comfort,’ said Farwalker, patting the chair next to his and grinning beguilingly at her. And Comfort sat down and told

them. Brat ate and listened and felt bludgeoned.

Farwalker was right. She was like a waterfall, tumbling on and on and on. Brat kept her head down and mentally gasped for breath. Comfort continually interrupted herself, exchanging greetings with other guests, leaping up to oversee one of the cooks or rebuking a slow-moving potboy; but she always took up the thread again exactly where she had left it and never had to pause to recall what she had been saying.

Her memory was astonishing, even to a Storyteller. In her own way, thought Brook admiringly, Comfort was indeed a Storyteller. And at last, among all the other items of news that meant nothing to Brook, was the one that Swift and Farwalker had been waiting for. Lord Freetongue was at his City house and had recently given a splendid party.

‘On the very night the news came of old Lord Ironmind’s death, too! The Court went into mourning, as was proper, of course, but Freetongue! Well! He said he’d paid for all the food and the entertainers and wasn’t having it all go to waste. So, when none of the Court came (well, they wouldn’t, would they?) he had in all sorts of folk off the streets! Such goings on!’ recounted Comfort happily.

‘So,’ said Graycat, when Comfort was out of earshot, ‘my father is indeed dead.’

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

As they left the inn, one of the other customers followed them into the street and as soon as they were out of Comfort's sight, joined them. Graycat and Farwalker greeted her with pleasure, then had to break off to salute two more apparently casual passers-by who quietly tagged on.

They moved on and more friends arrived, some to exchange greetings, others to join what was rapidly becoming a walking committee meeting. Graycat broke it up.

'The child must rest,' she said firmly, 'and Farwalker and I were up all night. Let us spend the afternoon in the safe house and meet this evening after lastmeal time.'

No-one mentioned it, but Brook knew that she would not be at the meeting. 'Just as well for both of us, cousin,' had said Gracewell, not to know any secrets. Brook knew that she was being kept safe, that it was only good sense to keep her away from any dangerous knowledge; but she felt miserably shut out. These people were taking her friends away and turning them into strangers. Graycat was growing remote and Baylock, no, Farwalker, was...

Here Farwalker turned to her, saying penitently, 'I forgot how tired you must be, Brat. Can you bear up a little longer? We are going to the house where they keep my bow for me. I'd like you to see her.' His tone changed as he spoke. It was as if the bow were alive, a great Lady to whom Brat was to be presented. Brat was intrigued and awed. Here was another legend turning into reality before her eyes.

Farwalker had been the Young Archer, the finest bowman in the Joined Lands after The Archer, even before he had reached his full strength. His great bow, the Lady Scathe, was known to Brook from half a dozen Stories. She was to be allowed to see the bow that had killed the terrible Black Boar, the bow that was said to have groaned aloud when Farwalker was nearly trapped by enemies at Scar Ford...

Was this the very bow with which the Young Archer had beaten all Lord Farsight's picked bowmen to earn that title? And was this the bow which

had dealt death to those same bowmen after the Young Archer had won his famous Use-name of Farwalker? Brook wondered if she would dare to ask.

The safe house had a secret room, a narrow space like a passage hidden within the thickness of a back wall of the old stone house. It was windowless, silent and rather cold.

Brook thought, with a shudder, that if the door jammed itself, nobody would hear a call for help. You might die here unbeknown. But that, she told herself firmly, was silly. Several people knew they were here, the owner of the house and his daughter, Merryheart, were to bring them lastmeal later on and anyway the door could only be barred from within. And, of course, Gray and Farwalker were here.

Gray, sitting on one of the plump straw mattresses, pulled off her boots and said, 'Greet your Lady from me, Farwalker. I am her servant – but exhausted!' She let herself fall back in an attitude of total relaxation and seemed to fall asleep at once.

Baylock moved softly to the wall where the great bow hung, swathed in layers of wrappings. Over his shoulder, he told Brat, 'She teases me about my bow. But Gray is a marksman; she knows what it means to me to have to leave my Lady Scathe behind.'

Brat watched, hardly breathing, as the bow was carefully unwrapped. It was much longer than she was tall, with a strong graceful swell from the tips to the centre. In the candlelight it gleamed as if gilded.

Farwalker's hands slid up and down the wood, caressingly. He peered along the bow's length, then with an almost guilty glance over his shoulder at the oblivious Graycat, he pulled a small coil from his pack. 'I like to string her, just to...' he broke off and Brook said softly, 'To make sure she hasn't forgotten you?'

'No,' replied the Young Archer, totally serious. 'To let her know that I have not forgotten her.'

Strung, the great bow took on an eager look, pulled into readiness by the slim bowstring. Farwalker slipped a bowguard onto his left hand, reached reflexively back over his shoulder for a shaft and stopped short. There was no quiver and no arrows. He shook his head at himself and very gently twitched the string. A deep thrum answered him, as if the bow spoke. He sighed, stripped off the guard and unstrung the bow again.

Brook sat down on her mattress, trying hard to be unnoticeable. 'Who looks after her while you are away?' she asked, speaking in a low

murmuring voice, so as not to break his mood.

‘Bowyer Heartwood. I’d not trust her to any lesser man,’ replied Farwalker absently. He flexed the bow slightly, and put her down to sort out the wrappings.

Brat caught her breath. Heartwood! The greatest Bowyer ever known, the maker of Scathe herself. He figured in almost as many Stories as did Farwalker, although mainly as the maker of some great bow or as a comparison of excellence. ‘Not near as fine as one of Bowyer Heartwood’s bows,’ was a standard phrase among Storytellers. Here was another legend escaped from Weaveword’s Stories.

She had always known that the Stories were true. That was taken for granted. But now they were real. What had been merely words was turning solid. She herself had stepped into a Story.

‘But perhaps everyone is part of a Story,’ she thought, startled. ‘It is just that only the exciting ones get told aloud!’

She was so overwhelmed by this new idea that she almost forgot to respond to Farwalker.

‘Heartwood must be very old now,’ she said at last, uncertainly. She had never thought of him as a living person before.

Farwalker agreed, still absently. He had begun to replace the wrappings and was absorbed in the task. ‘Was he... did he look after the Lady Scathe when you were left in the desert?’ Brook controlled her voice with all the skill at her command. She must not sound too eager or Farwalker might close himself up and tell her nothing.

‘No,’ said Farwalker, continuing to swaddle the great bow. ‘That was before he made her. I had another bow of his making then, Witchwood. I outgrew her later. I was told he wept with anxiety for her when he heard that she had been abandoned in the desert. He should have known it was not true!’

‘He couldn’t know what you had done with her,’ pointed out Brook, matching her tone to his as closely as she could.

‘He should have trusted me. He knew I’d look after her, come what might.’ Exasperatingly, it seemed that Farwalker had no more to say. He replaced Scathe on the pegs in the wall and, sitting down on his mattress, began to work his boots off.

Brook pulled off her own shoes, curled up on the mattress and began to plot her next probe. Somehow, without her meaning it, her eyes closed and

before she had decided on her next question, she had slipped into sleep.

She woke some hours later to the sound of their host's knock and the news that their meal would be ready in a short time. Blue-eye, their host, was so anxious for their safety that he insisted they must go one at a time to wash and use the necessary, while the other two barred the door until the first returned. He explained that, should there be an alarm, only one person could get through the narrow entrance at a time 'and suppose there wasn't time for all of you to get in!'

He stared at Graycat with such anxiety that she gave in gracefully. 'He should be called Worryguts, not Blue-eye,' grumbled Brook, when he and Gray had left the room.

'Softly, Storyteller!' Farwalker warned her. 'Remember,
*'Though sticks or stones should break your bones,
Those bones with care will mend;
But the Storyteller's name for you
Clings fast to your life's end.'*

Brat gave him a quick grin and finished the rhyme,
*'And the Story that he tells of you
May last to the World's end.'*

'Very well, I'll not say it where anyone else can hear. I suppose he doesn't worry quite all the time; and one blue and one brown eye is always his!'

Blue-eye brought them their food and fresh candles and suggested that when Graycat and Farwalker had gone to meet their friends, Brook might like to sit with his daughter.

'She will cheer you up,' he said encouragingly. Brook, who was not aware of needing to be cheered, stiffened with affront and resolved to avoid Merryheart's company even if she were bored to tears on her own. Then she noticed Gray looking at her with an interested expression.

'I do still feel very tired but perhaps – later, I'll be happy to talk with her,' she replied politely. Gray smiled at her.

Before they left her, Farwalker made sure that she could open the secret room from the outside (a matter of pressing on one particular stone in the wall) as well as barring it safely from the inside.

Blue-eye was going with them. He fussily begged Brook to bar herself in if she decided to sleep again. It took all Brook's self control not to snap at him and, somewhat surprised at herself – could she be more tired than

she had realised? – she thanked him warmly and closed the door behind them all with relief.

Then she piled the three mattresses one on another to make a comfortable seat and sank down on them to think herself into a courteous frame of mind.

Gray would expect her to visit Merryheart and be polite to the tiresome girl. Very well, she would do it and do it properly, ‘But if only I had some excuse not to!’ said Brat crossly to herself.

A few minutes later she began to change her mind. The narrow box of a room that had been quite tolerable while Graycat and Farwalker were there, even if asleep, was becoming steadily more oppressive. It was so quiet that Brat found herself listening for the rustling of the straw beneath her weight. The walls felt as if they might be moving in on her and she shifted restlessly on her pile of mattresses and wondered how long it would be before Farwalker and Graycat returned.

She was just about to pick up her candle and go to look for Merryheart when there was a sound of slow heavy footsteps beyond the door, a knocking, in the correct cadence, and then the door swung inward. In the narrow space, with a candle in his hand, stood the largest and baldest man Brat had ever seen. He had stopped dead on the threshold, but now had to step forward as the heavy door was trying to swing shut against him. It closed behind him, silent and ponderous on its counterpoise.

‘And who may you be, minikin?’ he demanded. His deep voice and presence filled the room as his enormous shoulders almost brushed either wall.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

‘Sir, I am Brook Storyteller, daughter of Storyteller Weaveword,’ Brook said formally, as soon as she had a little recovered from her surprise. ‘I am also called Brat,’ she added, tilting her chin at this immense intruder.

‘An unexpected pleasure,’ pronounced the old man. ‘Merryheart told me that Farwalker’s Storyteller friend was here, but I was expecting someone rather different. Well, youngster, I am Bowyer Heartwood, at your command!’ He bowed, filling the room with enormous shadows and making both candle flames bob and flutter.

Brat scrambled up and bowed very low indeed. The Bowyer! ‘Sir, you have only just missed Farwalker. He has not long been gone,’ she said respectfully. ‘If it please you to hasten, you may catch him yet.’

Bowyer Heartwood gave a deep chuckle. ‘No, no, lass, at my age you don’t go running after the youngsters. I knew he’d gone; he’ll be back soon enough. I thought to stay and keep you company until he returns.’

‘Yes, please!’ Brat felt immensely relieved. Heartwood might fill up the room overwhelmingly, but no walls would close in on him. She beamed happily as the Bowyer lowered himself on to the pile of mattresses and put his candlestick on the floor to one side. She sat cross-legged beside him.

After a moment she asked tentatively, ‘Would you tell me what happened to Farwalker’s bow Witchwood while he was earning his name in the desert? Did you really think that he had abandoned her? What did happen? The Story doesn’t say.’

‘And the Storyteller naturally wants to know!’ Heartwood smiled at her reassuringly. ‘Well, now, yes, I was angry when I thought of the finest boy’s bow I had yet made warping under the desert sun; but of course the Young Archer had looked after her.’

‘He had been travelling with a small tribe of nomads on the fringe of the true desert, hoping to throw his pursuers off the scent, but when he realised that he could not escape them, rather than risk their seizing and destroying Witchwood, he gave her to the nomads.’

Heartwood stopped to see how Brook took this. Her horrified expression seemed to gratify him, for he gave his huge bass chuckle and went on, 'But he gave her to them unstrung and told them that unless one of them could string her, she must be given back to him when he returned. Or, if he were not back in three months, they were to send for me to take her.'

'But he got back in time?'

'Oh, yes. It took him nearly a month to recover his strength before he was able to seek them out, but not one of them had succeeded in stringing my masterpiece! Well, they didn't know how. They use slings and spears and are great marksmen with those, but a bow! It's my belief they thought her magic and the Young Archer a magician, so they never really tried to string her. They looked after her well, for the Young Archer had told them how. And also told them his ghost would come back to haunt them if he got killed and they'd misused her!

'After he got her back, he went looking for those scum. If only I had been there! I might have stopped him.' The Bowyer fell silent, shaking his head a little. Then he turned to gaze at Brat, 'Have you seen Farwalker angry? So angry that he speaks softly, like a great cat purring and his eyes grow wide and very bright and fixed?'

'Yes, once,' said Brat, remembering The Frolicksome Filly and a purple-faced landlord. 'I thought he would kill the man.'

'What happened?'

'Graycat stopped him.'

'He will not always have Graycat to stop him, you know,' said Heartwood, soberly.

'What do you mean?' asked Brook. Her voice sounded too shrill. She was scared.

'Why, Graycat is not any man's woman. For now, Farwalker is her man; but some day, soon or late, she will go her own way as she has done before. Then who is to keep his temper reined?'

'You used to do it,' said Brat, dubiously, knowing that this could not be the answer.

'I have served my time,' said Heartwood. He smiled at her. 'Now it is your task, Brook Brat Storyteller. I'll make a bargain with you. I shall tell you how I have reined in Farwalker's rages and you will promise to do

your best for him. In return, I shall give you the Story of my life. How does that suit, Storyteller?’

Brook’s mouth opened in amazement. Any Storyteller would give a year’s takings for Heartwood’s full story, and here he was casually offering it to a twelve-year-old who was hardly yet allowed to tell anything but Tales! Not casually, though, not really. He was serious about her helping Farwalker.

‘You’ll only be able to start to tell it to me tonight,’ said Brook Storyteller, making up her mind.

‘Good lass! But I reckon it’s a bit late tonight for me to start. What do you say, young Storyteller, suppose tonight you tell me the Story of how you met Graycat and Farwalker!’

Brat drew a deep breath of wonder. Glory flooded her. Her own Story! No other Storyteller knew it. No-one could dictate how she should tell it, which part to emphasise, what to leave out. It was hers alone. Then the excitement faded a little. The responsibility was heavy. Not only must you tell the truth, but you must be honest with yourself; there could be no putting yourself in a good light, no falsifying of motives. Brat licked her lips nervously as she thought herself back, remembering as clearly as possible.

Then she sat up straight, cross-legged, her hands resting on her knees in the correct Storytelling pose.

‘My father, Storyteller Weaveword, took me with him to Talltowers town while my grandmother was away,’ she began, holding her voice steady. ‘In Talltowers town, on my twelfth birthday, he disappeared.

‘He had told me that he was summoned to entertain the Lord Eaglon in his Great Hold by the North Gate, but he promised to return before lastmeal time. I was to prepare a feast to celebrate my birthday and I had it all ready. He did not come.

‘I waited until dusk and then until dark and then by candlelight until I fell asleep at the table and woke to find the candles guttered out and dawn lightening the room.’

Brat swallowed, twice, then holding her voice steady went on, ‘He never came. I have never seen him since.

‘For a while I was angry, thinking that he had forgotten me, been too well pleased with his reception to come back in time, or so drunk that he

had fallen asleep at the lord's table as I had at our landlady's. So for all that day I did nothing. Then I began to search.

'The old woman in whose house we lodged demanded payment, for food and rent. I had no money. She took my father's spare clothes and sold them while I was out searching, and on my return told me that I must pay for my food meal by meal.

'I sold all my spare clothes. Soon that money was gone. The woman said that I might stay for one more night; but that was so that, while I slept, she might steal the clothes I had been wearing. In the morning she threw me an old sack for a tunic and told me to get out. I tried to get my clothes back but she flung me down on the hearth and my hair caught alight. She was scared, then, and she put out the flames in a hurry and cut off the scorched part. I no longer looked anything like Weaveword's daughter; so, although she meant me no good, in spite of herself she saved me.

'I did not realise that at the time, of course. When she drove me from her door I thought I must die if I could not find my father. I went at last to the Lord's Hold to ask for him. I had not dared to go when I had decent clothing. But now that I looked like a beggar, I grew bolder. I went to the gate and told the guards that I had a message for him. They laughed and said he had never been there. But I knew he had.

'On the seventh day after my birthday I was very hungry and very much afraid. Nobody that I dared question would admit to having seen Storyteller Weaveword. I had no money, no clothes, no food and no means of getting any. Looking as I did, I knew that I would never get a hearing as a Storyteller and what other work could I do? Bigger and stronger streetskimmers helped to set up the market stalls and were paid in food. But I am small for my age and do not look strong even when I am well fed. By this time I suppose I looked – useless. Nevertheless, I went to the market to scavenge for food. Spoiled fruit, perhaps some stale bread if I were quick enough... Then I saw Farwalker.

'And I saw Graycat come up behind him and speak to him, in the way one does to make a person jump. Only he didn't jump.

'So I went on watching and presently she squeezed the plum she was eating too hard and it shot out of her hand and landed quite near me. Because I was watching them, I saw the plum before the – the other beggars and I got to it first.

‘I didn’t eat it; I gave it back to her. I put on a show for them – bowing and offering the plum as if it were a gold piece! I was ashamed,’ said Brat bitterly, suddenly breaking out of her Storyteller’s calm and blinking candle-reflections from her wet eyelashes. ‘I am still ashamed. But I had to catch and hold their attention! I had to have help! So I used them. They were so courteous and gentle to me that I have loved them ever since, but I will always be ashamed... and suppose they ever find out?’

‘Hush, lass. Do you really think they’d care? And they would want to help Weaveword’s daughter.’

‘They told me they owed their lives to his – silence.’

‘Then all the more would they welcome the chance to help you. You are going to help them, too, remember.’

‘If they are alive to be helped!’

‘Now, lassie, you’re not worried about Farwalker and Graycat, are you? The two of them have been dodging guards and Lordsmen for years; there’s no call for you to fret yourself over them!’

Brat sniffed and said fiercely, ‘I’m not fretting! I know they can take care of themselves. I’m quite sure they are safe now. I’d just like to be certain they’ll go on being safe.’

‘Who can be sure of that? Why, the Sky Folk might arrive tomorrow!’ said Heartwood and chortled at his joke and at Brat’s shocked expression.

Automatically, she made the Sign and swallowed hard. ‘Don’t you believe in the Sky Folk?’ she asked, when she could speak again.

‘Well, now, I’m an old man, my dear, and I’ve never heard of anyone who has seen or heard from the Sky Folk since the days of the Sorceress; and that was I don’t know how long ago.’

‘I know!’ said Brook Storyteller. ‘It was in the year that the great earthquake shook the Joined Lands and one of the Star Stones fell that the Sorceress died. Or vanished, anyhow. And that was...’ she made a hasty mental calculation, ‘six hundred and twenty-three years ago. Come next Sowing month,’ she added.

‘You are the Storyteller,’ said Heartwood, accepting an overwhelming argument. ‘Then we’ll say that no Sky Folk have been seen for at least six hundred years. It does seem to me that if they were coming back, they’d have come by now.’

‘It doesn’t follow,’ argued Brook, earnestly. ‘They didn’t say exactly when they would return, just that they would. Suppose they came back

now! This year!’

‘Things have changed in the last six hundred years,’ said Heartwood. ‘They mightn’t like it. No magic, no Dragons. Dull, really. Now, what happened to you next?’

Brat came back with a start. ‘Oh. After that, Graycat told me Weaveword was dead. I think I knew he was, really. I’d been trying not to believe it, before. But I believed her.

‘And then they said that I must leave Talltowers at once or be hunted down by Eaglon’s men. I couldn’t credit it at first. It seemed unnatural to be hunted. It still does.’

Gazing into the candle flame she told Heartwood the rest of the story of her strange journey.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The next day Farwalker announced that he had a visit to pay, and Brook must come too. 'You've been asked for,' he told her, mysteriously.

He led her back on their previous day's tracks as far as the shop where he had sounded the bell. Here he stopped and called, 'Gather!'

Almost at once a wispy little elderly woman appeared from among the piles of oddments. Her wraparound, of a startling shade of orange, made her greying hair appear lighter and her dark skin darker than they really were. She was so thin and seemed so light as she pattered towards them that Brat half expected her to float. She hurried straight to Farwalker crying joyfully, 'Archer! You are safe?' and he caught her up and hugged her, laughing.

'Of course I am! So is Graycat. You were surely told, by Carter Stark or another of your intelligencers.'

'I could not be easy until I had touched you,' she told him. 'Put me down, lad, and introduce me to your companion. It is no-one I know, is it?'

As Farwalker obediently lowered her to the floor, she turned towards Brook. But her gaze seemed to be aimed a little above the girl's head and Brook suddenly knew that Gather was blind.

'This is my friend Brat,' said Farwalker, with a secret amusement in his voice.

'What sort of a name is that!' snorted Gather. 'Tell me what to call you, child, and pay no attention to this out-of-employ bowman!'

'Brat will do very well,' Brook assured her. 'Indeed, I chose it myself. But I am...'

'A Storyteller!' exclaimed Gather, to Brat's amazement.

'Why, yes! But how did you know?'

'Gather can tell a great deal about you from your voice alone,' Farwalker boasted. 'Go on, Gather. What else can you tell Brat about herself?'

'Treat me as a show at a fair, would you? Get away with you!' Gather poked him sharply in the ribs and turned back to Brat as Farwalker

doubled up, wheezing and complaining he was winded. 'Finish what you were saying, child,' she commanded.

'I am also called Brook, Weaveword's daughter,' said Brat. Gather stiffened. Then she gave a long sigh and held out her hand to Brook, who took it, puzzled. Gather's thin dry hand closed gently but firmly over hers and she said, with an odd quaver in her voice, 'So you have brought her. Tell me what she looks like, Young Archer.'

Farwalker was startled. 'Well, at the moment her hair and skin are dyed to match mine, but before we darkened them, her hair was almost the red-brown of beech leaves in autumn and her skin was much paler than most people's. She has eyes the colour of ale,' he added, prosaically. Brook gave a sputter of laughter, but Gather merely nodded intently.

'She is not pretty, not yet,' went on Farwalker judiciously, 'but she has an interesting face and lovely eyebrows, curved like the arc of a bow and deep brown. She is small-boned. I took her for nine, ten at the most, when we first met, but she is just twelve years old. And she asks questions enough to drive a man mad.'

Brook waited until she was sure that he had finished, then she said caustically, 'You left out my hands and feet and elbows.'

'Your hands I can feel for myself,' said Gather, laughing, 'and the others, guess at. Leave your friend Brat with me, Farwalker, and run along. We shall do very well without you!'

Farwalker bent to kiss her cheek, said to Brook, 'I'll be back before noonmeal time,' and went. At the door he tripped on a basket full of tiny copper jugs amid a great jangling and rattling, but none of them fell out, and he waved an apologetic hand and vanished.

'Clumsy!' Gather called after him, and then turned to her guest with a sudden, startling change of manner.

'Tell me, Storyteller Weaveword's daughter, know you the prophecy that Foreseer Swansister made after the death of the Overlord's only child?'

Brook stared at her. Gather's sudden formality and her deeply solemn tone struck Brook with such a feeling of awe that for a moment she could not speak. Then she said huskily, 'Yes, I do know it.'

'Speak it for me,' said Gather.

Brook straightened her spine and spun back through her memories.

‘These are the words of Foreseer Swansister when she heard of the deaths of Brighthair Overlord’s daughter and her Lord Steelsure.

*‘The dead have left a rent behind
That none now living shall re-bind,
Until there comes one who shall be;
Until the sight that all shall see,
An Overlord in chains
Who still the chains disdains
And even though a prisoner bound, walks free.’*

‘But I don’t know what it means,’ she added, ‘except that the first three lines mean that the Overlord will have no heir of his body and that no-one who was alive when Swansister made her prophecy will become his heir. But after that I don’t understand it at all, though it must be about the Overlord’s heir. I suppose.’

‘That is because it has not yet happened,’ said Gather, coolly. ‘You will recognise it when it does.’

‘I? I shall? Why me?’

‘The Overlord is old and not strong. He can’t live much longer. His Heir will have to appear soon and you are going to be around the City for a while yet. Why not you?’ Gather smiled at her. And waited.

Brook stared at her suspiciously. ‘I think there is something you have not told me,’ she said slowly.

Gather looked satisfied. ‘Yes, there is more. Foreseer Swansister was my cousin. She was also my dear friend. She told me the rest of the prophecy and made me promise to tell it only to the Witness.’

‘But there isn’t any more! That’s all there is!’ protested Brat. ‘What Witness?’ she added, with sudden foreboding.

‘Listen,’ said Gather. ‘Listen carefully, Brook Beechenhair’s daughter, and remember. This is the rest of the prophecy,

*Supported by the bow
That deals both weal and woe,
One line to end, another to begin.
And there to read the sign,
Child of the Witch’s line,
Witness unrecognised, caught in Fate’s gin.’*

Brook gave a great shudder. ‘How did you know?’ she asked in a whisper.

‘I have had thirty years to think over my cousin’s words,’ said Gather, gravely. ‘Long ago I made it my business to trace all the descendants of the Lady Dragonfriend, the Last Sorceress. Your mother Beechenhair was the last of that line and died in giving you birth. You must be the Witness. There is no-one else it can mean.’

‘And the bow?’ Brat stared round at Gather’s weird accumulation of objects as if in search of inspiration. ‘Does it mean Farwalker? Is Farwalker to support the Heir? It can’t mean that he is the Heir. The Overlord’s Heir is always one of his kindred, one of the Lords related to his house!’

‘You will understand it when it happens,’ repeated Gather with conviction. ‘Meanwhile, keep silent. You will know the right time to speak.’

And she would say no more on the subject. Brat was firmly deflected onto Gather’s stock-in-trade, which was indeed fascinating and would have absorbed her at any other time.

As Baylock had told her, Gather could lay her hand on any item, although some of them had to be dug out from beneath others. She showed Brook a set of sheep bells, each giving a different note, enamelled in brilliant reds and blues. She pulled out from under a feather robe an ivory casket, no bigger than the palm of Brook’s hand but carved with the story of *Stardust and the Dragon* in such fine detail that Brook could barely see it and had to take it to the shop entrance to get the daylight full on it. She let Brook wander around by herself, looking at drawings and leather belts and fans made of ivory or silk or feathers, at wooden dolls, rolling pins, clogs and hair ornaments.

Finally, Gather lifted a pile of cobweb-fine woollen shawls to disclose a rack of belt knives and daggers and made Brook accept a throwing knife, small enough for her hand, large enough to do lethal damage if necessary.

‘You think I’ll need it,’ stated Brook, fastening the sheath to her belt.

Gather smiled. ‘It seems reasonable to be prepared,’ she said. ‘But I am no Foreseer, Brook. I do not know what you will need, merely what you may have a use for. Your father will have taught you to use a knife, I have no doubt.’

Brook nodded then, remembering, hastily said aloud, ‘Yes, indeed. But Storytellers are not supposed to need more than a knife. We don’t bear arms.’

‘I know, child.’ Gather was amused. ‘You, however, are more at risk than most Storytellers. You had better try the knife. Medley!’ she called.

After a moment a curtain at the back of the shop was drawn aside and a young woman appeared. She wore a loose wraparound in a nondescript shade of dusty brown or dusky grey; it was hard to tell which. Her black hair was drawn back in a loose knot at the nape of her neck, where it straggled unbecomingly. And she was strikingly beautiful. Brat stood staring, unable to speak for amazement. Medley’s delicate brows rose but she smiled, seeming more amused than annoyed at Brook’s reaction.

‘Yes, Gather? What needs doing?’ she asked.

‘This is Brook Brat Storyteller,’ Gather stated. ‘She ought to try out her new throwing knife. May she use your target?’

‘Of course.’ Medley gestured towards the curtained doorway. Brook followed her through it and recoiled in shock. Medley’s target was a life-sized figure of a Westfolderman in full battle gear. It was carved from some very soft wood, into which a knife could sink without damage to a finely-honed point, and realistically coloured. It was frankly intended for manslaughter.

Brook thought of the rough target that Graycat had made for her crossbow lesson and which, though its function was the same, she felt had been more natural. This target had been made by someone not completely sane. Did Gather know quite how realistic Medley’s target was? Brat wanted to run back and escape from the shop. But she had to wait for Farwalker.

And would Medley allow her to escape? She glanced at Medley. She was smiling gently to herself but as Brook turned her head, Medley said briskly, ‘Do you know for what turning length it is weighted?’

‘No,’ admitted Brook. She held out the knife. ‘Can you tell me?’ Then she held her breath as Medley inspected the knife, balancing it across two fingers. However, Medley merely handed it back.

‘It should make a half turn in five paces. That is what these knives are usually weighted for. That toe mark,’ she pointed to a line painted on the floor ‘is five paces from the target. Try from there.’

Brat toed the line and took the knife blade between finger and thumb. Medley moved well out to the side and said, ‘Aim for the heart, first.’

Brat threw. The target bore splotches of scarlet paint on all the most vulnerable areas and these were pitted with knife holes. The heart was not

the most marked, Brat noticed. Her knife thudded into the wood, but she knew before it landed that she had not hit the mark squarely.

‘No good. You hit his breastbone,’ said Medley, urgently. ‘He’s hurt, but he’s still coming at you and he’s angry. What do you do now?’

‘Run away?’ suggested Brook, hoping to make her laugh. There was a whispering sound and suddenly two knives hit the target so rapidly that the two thuds sounded like one and its echo. One landed in the throat of the target, the other in its belly.

‘Never run!’ said Medley between her teeth. Her voice was hoarse and savage and the breath rasped in her throat as if she had to force it into her lungs. Brat swung round in alarm. Medley’s eyes glittered, her cheeks flamed, her very hair seemed to rise in a mane. She was terrifying; and even more beautiful than before.

In a gentle voice she added, ‘Or if run you must, let it be toward, not away.’ She walked over to the target and pulled the knives free. Her own two were far thinner and more delicate than any throwing knife Brook had ever seen. Indeed, they looked too light to be of use. But they had sunk to the hilt into the wood.

Medley noticed Brook’s interest and handed her one of the knives, saying, ‘I always hit meat, not bone. They don’t need to be very stout.’ She was quite calm and professional again. Brook swallowed hard and gave back the slender weapon.

Medley, in a business-like manner, corrected her grip on the knife and her stance, then showed her other marks at various distances from the target and urged her to try the knife from all of them.

‘Then you will know exactly what you can do,’ she said. ‘It is necessary to know your limitations.’

Brook was very glad when Farwalker appeared to take her back to the safe house.

‘Why didn’t Gather warn me about Medley?’ she asked when they were safely in the street.

‘Gather is accustomed to her. I didn’t warn you, either,’ said Farwalker.

‘You didn’t know I’d meet her,’ snapped Brook, irritable with nervous tension. ‘Is she really mad?’

‘Gather did not explain her to you at all?’

‘No, indeed she did not! She just came into the target room and said that I’d practised enough. Then she sent Medley to look after the shop and

gave me wine and talked as if we were both Ladies – you know, nothing sort of chatter! I don't understand her!'

'Ah!' Farwalker sounded enlightened. 'She was testing you. Did you mention Medley's oddity to her?'

'Of course not, since she didn't! Well, I did thank her again for the knife and the chance to try it out, in a meaningful sort of way, but... It's nothing to laugh about!' she broke off indignantly as Farwalker gave a muffled snort. 'I was really scared!'

'I'm sorry, Brat. I was laughing at the neat way you paid Gather back! Well done!'

Brat gave it up. He was clearly not going to explain Medley's strange behaviour. Either he did not know the reason or he had promised not to tell it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

There was a great deal to learn before Brat could safely go about the City by herself and Gray and Farwalker were too busy to teach her. So, after consulting Gather, a guide was found, a streetskimmer, a fierce, sharp, stunted boy who called himself Shrimp and moved in much the same darting, flickering way as his namesake.

Gray insisted that Shrimp should be told exactly who Brat was and why she must be guarded. Blue-eye, who would have kept them all three mewed up in the secret room if he could, objected vigorously but Gray would not listen.

‘He will deal honestly with us if we deal honestly with him,’ she said firmly and left Brat to do it, to Brat’s consternation. Shrimp was outside her experience. However, she soon discovered that Shrimp was fascinated by Graycat. He knew almost as many of her adventures as did Brat and as soon as he realised that she was a Storyteller, demanded to be told their adventures on the journey to the City.

So Brat told her story, but not as she had to Heartwood. She emphasised Graycat’s part, giving a much shorter account of her meeting with Graycat and Farwalker and how they knew of Weaveword’s death but describing the fight with the three outlaws as excitingly as she could. Shrimp listened avidly. He was, to Brat’s surprise, not much interested in Farwalker. Brat discovered that this was because to him a longbow was a stupid weapon, useless in the sort of close-quarters street fighting that enthralled him.

Brat pointed out that the longbow would be very useful if, say, one were on a rooftop or shooting down the Great Avenue; but Shrimp would have none of it.

‘A stone would do as well,’ he insisted. ‘Or a slingshot. I’d like to learn to use that.’

‘Gray did say she’d teach me,’ Brat told him, ‘but there’s never been time.’

Shrimp gave her a scornful look. He would have made time!

Once Shrimp had got over his natural contempt for anyone not born in the City, they became quite good friends. Brat might think that Shrimp was obsessed with fighting but there was no denying the interest of being shown around the greatest city in the Joined Lands by one who knew pretty well every alley, every shop and a large number of the inhabitants. And Shrimp might feel that Brat had shamefully wasted her opportunities in Graycat's company but he soon discovered that she was an excellent listener who never forgot anything he told her.

Dressed in drab boy's clothes, Brat roamed unchallenged through the City with Shrimp by day. In the evenings she visited Heartwood. His Story was growing and fixing itself in her mind, falling into the right cadences almost on its own. She was almost happy.

Graycat and Farwalker meanwhile were also roaming the City, but with a very different aim. They were, so Brat gathered, meeting all sorts of people. Most of them were members of the Fellowship but sometimes it was a man or woman who might join if persuaded or one who was eager to join but must be carefully investigated first. Occasionally strangers called at the safe house, and then Gray would meet the visitor in an upper room, never in the secret room. Brat saw only one of these visitors and then by accident.

He arrived without warning. Brat was on her way to meet Shrimp at the Little Market. She went whirling through the street doorway and almost crashed into a short, wiry, middle-aged man whose shabby dress contrasted sharply with his air of authority. Brat stopped short, apologised, summed up the visitor in one long stare and darted away. But that evening, Graycat asked her about him.

'Would you know him again, Brook?' Brook nodded, wondering. 'Will you try to forget you ever saw him here? And if you ever see him elsewhere, will you make sure that nobody knows you recognise him?'

'Of course,' agreed Brook, readily. 'I suppose,' she added thoughtfully, 'he would usually be more richly dressed.'

Graycat gave her a sharp look, which Brook returned innocently. 'You may suppose what you will,' said Gray, dryly. And the subject was dropped.

Shrimp and Brat made several visits to Gather, the first time with a message from Graycat, but she never again made any reference to prophecies or showed any special interest in Brat. Medley seemed pleased

to see them and on their second visit invited them to use her target for their knife throwing practice. Shrimp was very flattered. Brat's acquaintance with Medley had raised her in his esteem and this invitation almost overwhelmed him.

He was very respectful to Medley and Brat learned that she and her target were famous among the streetskimmers of the City. Shrimp's having watched Medley practise was enough to make him great among them. That he had also sunk his own knife in the fabulous statue would raise him to dizzy heights.

It was something to watch, Brat admitted. Medley, her knives sheathed, would walk away from the target, and toss a small ball into the air. When she heard it land, she would spin round and draw and throw her knives in rapid succession. The glinting slivers of metal fountained from her fingers so swiftly that Brat, watching, thought one blink would make her miss seeing half of them. It was a spectacle that never failed to chill and enthrall her.

She asked Shrimp once if he knew Medley's story but he shook his head.

'She's always been like that,' was all he could tell her. Brat did not believe it for a moment. Something dreadful must have happened to Medley to twist her mind but if Shrimp did not know, it was no use questioning anyone else. Shrimp seemed to know most things in the City.

Gather had other visitors besides Brat and Shrimp. On their fourth visit they found a tall, very dark woman with Gather. She snatched up some article as if bargaining for it with Gather as soon as she saw them.

'Never mind Brat, Stark,' said Gather, 'she is one of us.' and Stark grinned and replaced the item. It was a child's toy and Stark gazed at it quizzically, saying, 'Well, any that knew me would think I'd gone barmy to want that! How do you go on, young Shrimp?'

Shrimp clicked his tongue and replied severely, 'Carter Stark, I present to you Brat Storyteller. Brat, Stark is the best carter in the City and the worst gossip.'

He gave Stark another stern look 'I do very well, thank you,' he said. 'I hope your trade prospers?'

Brat was almost gaping at him. She had never known Shrimp to be so formal. She gulped and made an equally formal acknowledgement of the

introduction. Stark responded with perfect gravity and then suddenly turned, grabbed Shrimp by the ears and gave him a smacking kiss.

‘Little demon!’ she said fondly, ‘I’ll give you prosperity! Here, take it; you’ve won your wager, fair and square!’ She chuckled, handed Shrimp a double-silver and turned to explain to Brat and Gather. ‘The little horror bet me that he’d not only learn a proper merchant’s greeting by the time I got back from this last trip, but he’d make occasion to use it, properly and reasonably. I never thought he’d do it!’

‘Fate played into his hands,’ said Gather, smiling, ‘but he makes his own luck. Did you know Stark was here today, Shrimp?’

‘I knew she’d report to you as soon as possible,’ said Shrimp, grinning broadly. ‘So when I heard she was back, I chanced it that she’d be here now.’

Shrimp was so full of himself after this that Brat longed to take him down a peg but he gave her no chance. She began to feel irritable. It would not help to quarrel with Shrimp, so she told him that she was hungry and would like to go home to her noonmeal. They set off, but before they had gone far Shrimp became restless. He kept turning his head, looking around him anxiously, almost sniffing the air.

Brat grew impatient. ‘What is it now?’ she asked as Shrimp again stopped her at a corner and peered round it before he would let her go on. Shrimp shook his head.

‘I don’t know. Something is up, though. There aren’t enough folk around for this time of day and those that are, look wrong. They walk too fast. Look! See that man over there? He’s too fat to be hurrying like that for no reason!’

Brat stared around her and decided that Shrimp was right. There was an air of trouble brewing. She felt as she did before a bad thunderstorm and she twitched her shoulders, shuddering and felt the hair rise on her head.

‘Let’s get home,’ she urged. Shrimp shook his head.

‘We’re much nearer to Gather’s shop. We’ll go back there.’ He turned and started away but Brat stood still.

‘No!’ she said. ‘I’m going home. I must know where Gray and Farwalker are.’

‘Don’t be a fool.’ Shrimp had never spoken so roughly. ‘They know we went to Gather’s. That’s where they’ll look for you. You may very well miss them on the way if you go on. Come on, quickly!’

He was right again. For a moment more Brat hesitated, longing to be sure that Farwalker and Graycat were safe, then she turned to hurry after Shrimp.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Gather's shop was empty but for a strange young man. He was bent over Gather, who sat in her high-backed chair, her head lolling to one side in a way that caught Brat's breath with fear. She darted forward, her attention so fixed on Gather that she paid no heed to Shrimp's warning call.

'What is it? Is she hurt?' she asked anxiously. Gather's eyes flickered open, just as Medley pushed past the man, thrust a pungent flask under Gather's nose and glared at all three of them impartially. 'Out!' she said fiercely. 'The lot of you! Leave her be!'

Gather put up a shaking hand and whispered, 'No, child. I must know the worst.'

She paused and Brat, leaning to catch her faint voice, said quickly, 'Don't try to talk. You shall hear all.'

'Will you now tell us what is wrong?' Medley turned impatiently to the young man standing beside her. He was shifting from foot to foot nervously and looked grey with fear. Now he backed a step like a shying horse.

'But I didn't really see!' he protested. 'If I'd only paid more heed! Yet how could I know what would happen?'

Then Medley's expression reached him and he gulped and said hastily, 'I was to meet Graycat at Comfort's place. She would be wearing man's dress and I was to call her Swift. I was there early and ordered ale. An argument was going on behind me, but I didn't look round until someone shouted, 'That's him!' Then I turned. I got the merest glimpse of someone falling and then several men hustled out, half carrying another as if he were drunk. And I waited for Gray but she didn't come. So I came here, not knowing where else I might ask for her.'

'And frightened Gather into a heart attack!' snapped Medley. 'You don't know yet that anything has happened to Gray!'

But Gray seemed to have vanished as though the earth had opened up and swallowed her.

Next day Gather's shop became the centre to which Gray's friends brought the results of their fruitless enquiries and where Brat fretted impotently, helped Medley to nurse Gather and watched Farwalker grow ever more drawn and tense.

Towards noon Shrimp returned from his dozenth sortie. He flung into the shop, alight with eagerness.

'Lord Freeforest has her!'

There was complete conviction in Shrimp's voice but Farwalker turned on him as if determined to disbelieve him.

'Who saw her? When? Where?' He shot the questions at Shrimp who replied steadily, 'The fishpeddler at the corner of Gap Street saw a bundle carried by two men, yesterday, at noon. He recognised one of the men as Freeforest's. See, he was one of the folk invited to Freeforest's feast the day the news came of Lord Ironmind's death. Freeforest couldn't get any of the Court to come...'

'Yes, I know what happened,' agreed Farwalker quickly. 'So the fishpeddler knew the man for one of Freeforest's servants. But why should the bundle be Gray?'

Shrimp swallowed. 'It was a person being carried. Old Scaley was certain he heard a groan and he's not so old he can't see a foot when it drags on the ground. He was scared, pretended not to notice. I hadta threaten him to get anything out of him at all!' added Shrimp.

'Then it might not be true, any of it!' exclaimed Brat in dismay. Could such information be trusted? Medley peered at Shrimp, narrow-eyed.

'What threats did you use, Shrimp Streetskimmer?' she asked.

'Just the usual, rumours spread about his wares – you know, Medley! Nothing violent!'

'And it still might not be Graycat. Some other may have fallen foul of the Lord,' said Farwalker.

'At the very same hour on the same day that she disappeared?' Shrimp spoke boldly, but he was tensed to duck if Farwalker turned on him.

Farwalker nodded grimly. 'Very well, Freeforest has her. Where?'

'His City Hold is built on the foundations of a Sky Folk building,' Stark said slowly. 'That Folk built under the ground more than above it. I can tell you something of his Hold.'

She was cross-questioned rigorously. Presently Medley said thoughtfully, 'If you mean to raid the dungeons, you had better pick a time

when the Lord is absent.'

'Who is likely to know what the Lords will do?'

'The Storytellers'll know. Silkentongue is here in the City, staying with Lady Jewel. If anyone can tell us, he can,' said a deep voice. Bull had returned from one of his own sorties. He was a very big man, but light on his feet. One ear was missing, sliced off by an enemy when Bull was trapped and helpless, and the other was scarred. Bull's enemy had been on the point of removing it when Gray had killed him. Bull was her liegeman, forever.

'I want Storyteller Silkentongue here at once.' Farwalker's voice was quiet but the furious force was still there.

There was a shocked pause. A woman said hesitantly, 'But suppose he won't come? He is not one of us and... he is The Storyteller, after all!'

'And I am The Archer,' replied Farwalker flatly.

'So Farwalker did beat Archer Clearshot!' exclaimed someone in a startled voice; and was hushed hastily.

'Who'll go to fetch The Storyteller? It will take at least an hour,' pointed out Blue-eye, gloomily.

'Carter Stark will get there quicker than that,' said Gather, gently. 'Stark?'

Stark left them, muttering fiercely under her breath.

It seemed a terribly long time before Storyteller Silkentongue arrived. Brat fidgetted miserably around the shop and the back rooms until Medley took pity on her and set her to preparing vegetables for the noonmeal. 'People still have to eat,' she said firmly. 'You'll not help Graycat by starving yourself and nor will The Archer.'

By the time The Storyteller arrived they had finished eating. No-one had felt much like food so the meal was soon over. It was a relief to be distracted from it.

Silkentongue was a small man, insignificant until he spoke. Then everyone fell silent and turned, drawn to him as to a magnet. The clear, caressing tones seemed to lighten everyone's mood. Even Farwalker's frown eased and he sat down on a barrel as if only now aware of how tired he was.

'What do you desire of me, Archer?' Silkentongue said gently.

'The Overlord has summoned the Landholders for the Great Gathering. The Summons went out weeks ago, and now that the last of the Lords has

arrived, the Great Gathering starts tomorrow evening at Star-rise. I want to know three things. First, must all the Landholders attend? Second, what will happen if no-one claims Lord Ironmind's heritage? Third, if it were claimed in the right of a wife, would she have to be present?'

'Your messenger told me of Graycat's abduction,' said Silkentongue. 'You believe then that Freetongue means to claim her inheritance by wedding her by force or persuasion?'

Farwalker nodded, and shuddered suddenly. 'She will never yield to either. She'd die first.'

'Certainly Lord Freeforest could claim in her behalf,' Silkentongue said thoughtfully, 'if they were wedded, but not without her personal confirmation. He would not dare to take her with him, unwed and unwilling. But he himself will certainly have to attend. If no claim is made, the Overlord will simply postpone the question of the inheritance.'

'But this Gathering, so Lady Jewel tells me, is for a greater purpose. I may not tell you what it is, for she told me in confidence; but I can tell you this, Graycat must attend the Gathering! She MUST be found and freed!'

He added, so softly that only Farwalker and Brat, both very close to him, could hear, 'You may trust Lady Jewel. May I tell her?' and at Farwalker's nod, he was gone, leaving everyone talking excitedly.

Under cover of the noise, Brook grabbed Shrimp and hissed in his ear, 'Let no-one notice I'm not here! I'll not be long,' and slipped out.

Silkentongue was only a few yards down the street and turned sharply as Brook ran after him. 'Storyteller! I am Brook, Weaveword's daughter,' she gasped. 'Please, brother of my father's mother, ask Lady Jewel to tell the Overlord of Graycat's disappearance. I can tell you no more. Storyteller's oath on it!'

Silkentongue gazed at her as if trying to read her thoughts. Then he said, 'Sister's son's daughter, I will do as you ask; and say nothing to any other. Storyteller's oath. Farewell for now.'

He smiled and turned away and Brook fled back to find everyone still talking. Their first effort, they agreed, must be to find Gray. The rescue would depend on how she was secured. Farwalker began to give orders.

'Find Brat a scarf,' he snapped. 'Or a piece of old cloth, something fairly thin. You'll need it to tie over your nose and mouth, Brat.'

Stark vanished. Brook, trying to keep her voice steady, asked, 'Where am I going, Bay?'

‘Into Lord Freeforest’s Hold. Through the air shafts. It’s the only safe way in to the punishment cells. The shafts will be full of dust, so you will need the scarf. You must take something to mark the way. Let’s see, not charcoal, it won’t show up...’

Shrimp broke in, shrill with fury. ‘Why Brat? Why not me? I’m smaller, I can get through anywhere better’n she can! Why not me?’

Farwalker’s impatience was icy. ‘Because Graycat knows Brat. No matter what has been – no matter what state she is in, she’ll recognise Brat’s voice and she’ll trust her. She hardly knows you and may not trust you.’ He turned back to Brat. ‘Chalk would do, perhaps. You’ll need a close-lantern, too.’

‘A clue of thread might be better than chalk,’ suggested Gather. Her voice was feeble but there was still spirit and courage in her face. ‘If the lantern were blown out or had to be doused, then she could still follow the thread back.’

‘Yes, you are right. Shrimp! Run to the kite stall in the lower market and buy some kite strings on winders. Better get six. Here, take these coppers.’

Shrimp snatched the coins and fled, with a last glare at Brat.

She stood frozen, stiff with fear. The idea of forcing herself into a narrow airshaft, choking on dust, perhaps unable to turn to get out, terrified her so much that she had to clench her teeth until her jaw-hinges ached so as to stop them chattering. Her hands shook and her knees trembled; her stomach felt full of ice.

But Farwalker’s rage scared her as badly. He seemed scarcely to see her or anyone else. His wide gaze was unfocussed and he held to one train of thought with an icy concentration that allowed of no distraction. All the while he spoke, gave directions, organised everything, he was quivering with fury. He was as taut as a drumskin, livid with suppressed frustration.

He cared for nothing but the object of his rage. Freeforest. He was sending Brat into great danger without a single thought for her.

‘I’m not Brat to him any more. I’m just an arrow that he has shot and he cares only for it to reach its target,’ she thought. He would have as little care for his own safety. He was as reckless as a wounded leopard and as dangerous.

‘I’ve failed you, Heartwood,’ thought Brook, through her terror.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

All too soon Stark was back with a long narrow scarf of fine muslin. 'Here you are, Brat. Wind this right round your head twice,' she said, 'then you can pull the first fold down over your nose and mouth and the second over your eyes if the dust is too bad.'

She looked at Brat anxiously and lowered her voice. 'You're scared, young'un, aren't you?' Brat wanted to burst into tears. Somehow she twitched her lips into a smile for Stark and nodded briefly, glancing cautiously at Farwalker. It was all right. He hadn't heard.

But Gather had. She turned her head slowly towards Brook and said, 'Come here, child.'

Brook knelt beside her chair and Gather gently laid the back of her hand against Brook's cheek 'Remember, Beechenhair's daughter,' she said softly, 'you are to be the Witness. You'll survive this, I promise. You shall be safe. Have no fears, my child. My cousin Swansister never in her life made a prophecy which did not come true.'

Brook rubbed her cheek against Gather's hand. 'Thank you, Gather,' she whispered. 'Wait for me to come back, won't you?'

Gather gave a little chuckle. 'I've waited a long time for the prophecy to be fulfilled. Do you think I mean to die now? No, no, I'll be here.'

Presently Shrimp returned with the kite strings, hugely indignant with the vendor. 'He tried to make me buy a kite! Said the strings were no use without a kite and I'd to take both! Huh! I told him! Try to cheat me, would he?'

'Is all quiet?' asked Farwalker, trying the winder to see how easily the string ran out.

Shrimp shrugged. 'Yes. Too quiet, even for a hot afternoon. I don't like it.'

'Shrimp knows,' Gather said quickly. 'Heed him, Archer. You don't know the City as Shrimp does.'

Shrimp swelled with pride, almost visibly. Farwalker gave him an absent glance. 'What is your advice, Shrimp?' he asked, in a just-held-in

tone that made Brook gulp. Her throat seemed terribly dry. Shrimp ignored the tone. He was bursting with importance. 'We must go across the rooftops,' he said eagerly. 'There are routes, I know nearly all of them, I can guide you over the roofs as far as Thousand-Statue Avenue. After that, I can show you some back ways that are hardly ever used by anyone. Crossing the Avenue will be tricky, though.'

'Stark?' Farwalker did not even look at her. He was carefully rolling the kite strings and the close-lantern in a strip of canvas, to be lashed with a length of thin rope.

Stark said, 'Shrimp's right. Don't know how Bull will get on scrambling among the rooftops, though.'

'As well as you, woman,' said Bull. Nothing and no-one could stop him joining in the rescue attempt. Farwalker had no intention of trying.

He nodded at Bull. 'Very well. Where's Medley?'

'I am ready,' called Medley from the inner room and came through the curtain, arranging her girdle to hide her sheathed knives. Brook was startled out of her daze of fear. Medley was wearing a low-cut scarlet wraparound embroidered in white and silver. She had piled her hair on top of her head, secured with jewelled pins. Her face was delicately painted in the latest style. Over her arm she carried a filmy black shawl. She was devastatingly lovely and alarmingly conspicuous.

'Medley's our eye-catcher,' Bull told Brook, seeing her puzzlement. 'She catches the eye of any watcher and we slip past. Or hit him over the head,' he added, pensively.

Shrimp gave a snort of laughter but Gather said determinedly, 'There is to be no violence if it can be avoided. Stealth is your need, to find Graycat and learn how she is held, but no violence. Not yet. You will do nothing to endanger Brat's mission, Bull, no matter what!'

Bull made a deep grumbling sound. 'I know that, Gather.' he said sheepishly. 'I'll not put any rub in her way.'

They set off at short intervals through the sleepy streets and over the sun-baked roofs, Shrimp leading, then Bull and Medley together, Bull carrying the bundle of kite-strings and lantern under his arm, then Brook. She had a number of small tools in a pouch under her tunic, a small auger, a hand hammer, several nails, a strike-a-light and some tow. She had left her dagger with Gather.

Behind her came Farwalker and Stark. They were as anonymous as possible, apparently just a couple of workers drifting back to an afternoon's toil. Neither their weapons nor their skills showed. Stark looked like any middle-aged woman worker, perhaps a gardener. She was drably clad and walked in a tired, slouching fashion. Farwalker looked much older than usual, his face set in down drawn lines, as if hope and excitement had long since left him. He plodded along beside Stark and no-one looking at them would ever have realised that they were both watching sharply for guards, for any danger to Brook and for any signs of disturbance in the City.

Shrimp led them economically across the City roofs. At the Great Avenue, Bull and Medley became gawking country visitors, loitering and staring whilst first Shrimp and then Brat slipped hastily across the wide street. Then they crossed with just enough fuss to keep attention away from Farwalker and Stark as they hurried over.

In the back alleys beyond the Great Avenue they closed up a little. Medley threw the black shawl she had been carrying over her head and shoulders. It covered her almost to her ankles, extinguishing her bright clothes and jewels and turning her back into Gather's unobtrusive assistant. Brook, following her, was relieved. It seemed unnatural for Medley to flaunt herself.

The ancient walls of Lord Freetongue's City Hold loomed up before them suddenly across a narrow sideways. Shrimp slid back to Farwalker's side and murmured proudly, 'The back entryway is round the next corner. Orders?'

'You have done well, Shrimp,' said Farwalker softly, 'and I thank you. Stark, will you tell us what to expect?'

'Whenever I've delivered a load to this entrance,' said Stark, 'there's been one man on guard, as I told you, inside the gateway, in a little alcove in the wall. He can see the street, since the gates are of open ironwork, but only at an angle. There is a blind spot in the wall's shadow, so to speak, where you can get quite close to him. But since he is inside the gates, you can't actually reach him unless you can get over the wall behind his alcove. This time of day, and so hot as it is, he may be dozing, of course.'

'Shrimp, you wander along and see if he is alone and how alert he is,' said Farwalker. 'Don't hurry, and if he is alert, don't come back the same way, but circle round so that he does not see you return.' Shrimp looked as

though he wanted to tell Farwalker to teach his great-grandma how to sup ale. He restrained himself, nodded and pattered away. He was back in a very short time.

‘He’s alone and half asleep,’ he reported. ‘He didn’t see me coming or going, that I’ll swear to, but the gates are shut.’

‘To be expected,’ rumbled Bull. ‘What now?’

‘I could turn my ankle just outside,’ suggested Medley, twitching the shawl back a little to show her elaborately dressed hair.

‘Would he open the gates at once, though? Mightn’t he call someone to help you?’ asked Brook. ‘Depends on the sort of man he is,’ said Stark with a wry grin.

Farwalker frowned. ‘Perhaps he’ll have to die,’ he said softly. ‘I’d hoped...’

Brook shuddered. ‘No!’ she said urgently. ‘I know a sleep charm. I can make him sleep!’ There was a sudden silence. They all stared at her, blankly or in open disbelief.

‘It’s true! It is in one of the oldest Stories of the Great Cycle, the one which is always recited at the Year’s Turn Festival. *The Story of the Last Sorceress.*’

Farwalker shook his head. ‘If it is always recited then, why haven’t we heard of it?’

‘You have. This is the part I mean, where the heroes are nearly trapped by the Cold Dragon. Listen!

The Sorceress saw him, her spell sought the serpent;

‘I shall charm you, watcher; chant you a slumber song,

‘Close your cold eyes with my singing spell,

‘Slumber now, Serpent; soft sleep enfolds you!

‘Dream now, Dragon; heaviness holds you!

‘Watch not in wakefulness, let sleep enfold you,

‘Drowse now in dreaming, heaviness hold you,

‘Sleep now, deep now, sleep!’

Weary the watching Worm; spellbound the Serpent;

The Dragon was dazed by the Sorceress’ song.

Safe went the wanderers through the fell forest...’

Brook stopped. ‘That’s the spell,’ she said calmly.

‘It worked for the Sorceress, maybe, but that was long ago. We did not go to sleep!’ said Farwalker. He spoke gently but his impatience showed

through.

‘Well, no. I wasn’t singing it. It only works when you sing it,’ explained Brat. ‘When the Story is recited, the tune is played to accompany the words of the spell but it is never sung. We don’t want to send the audience to sleep!’

Shrimp gaped. ‘You really believe it! Medley! Stark! Tell her it’s nonsense!’

Medley made no reply. She gave Brook a long, thoughtful look, and turned away. Stark stared at Farwalker. ‘Worth trying, I’d say. The man’s half asleep already.’

Bull gave a snort of disbelief, but said nothing. Farwalker stood rubbing his forehead as if to scrub sense into himself, blinking in the strong sunlight.

‘Brat,’ he said slowly. ‘Be very sure. This could mar all. You truly believe the song will send its hearers to sleep?’

Brat nodded.

‘Then won’t we sleep, too?’

‘Not if you plug your ears,’ said Brat, with so strong an air of sense that the others found themselves accepting her reasoning as the most natural thing in the world.

Shrimp still held aloof. ‘It takes a sorceress to make a spell work,’ he said fiercely. ‘You’re not one of the Sky Folk!’

‘The Last Sorceress was my many times great-grandmother,’ Brat told him absently. ‘It will work.’

‘What! Who told you that?’ demanded Farwalker in amazement.

‘My mother’s half-brother, Speaksilver. When my mother knew she was dying after my birth, Speaksilver was the only one who was with her, my father being away. Since Speaksilver is not descended from the Sorceress, he would never have known had there been anyone else to tell. He told me as soon as I was old enough to understand.’ Seeing they were all looking blank, she added, ‘Gather knows. She’s known for a long time.’

‘Plug your ears,’ ordered Farwalker abruptly. ‘We’ll try it.’

Brat tore strips off her ragged tunic for them, walked softly round the corner and began to sing.

‘Slumber now, Serpent, soft sleep enfold you...’

She cupped her hands round her mouth to direct the sound toward the sentry and gradually let her voice grow louder.

The others, watching her with varying degrees of scepticism, could hear her faintly despite the wads in their ears. Presently they found themselves yawning. Shrimp, startled, clapped his hands to his ears to reinforce the wadding.

Brook calmly finished her song and motioned to them to free their ears. They obeyed, staring at her as if they had never really seen her before. Stark, determinedly unmoved, looked the sentry over. 'Well, it worked! Like a charm!' she said, and gave a sudden hiccup of laughter.

Everyone shushed her and they walked quietly past the guard and into the entrycourt. But Brook noticed that they were careful not to step upon her shadow.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Just as Stark had told them, the grille covering the airshaft's opening lay sunk into the base of the wall facing them across the courtyard. Bull went directly to it, ignoring everything else and began working on the bar that held it in position.

Shrimp stayed by the gateway, peering out, ready to give warning should anyone come or the sentry begin to stir. Stark walked quietly over to the side door that gave access to the kitchens and Medley stood by the gate in the court's farthest corner. It led into a walled garden.

Farwalker took the other door which, so Stark believed, led to a guardroom. Brat, feeling useless, stood clutching the bundle of kite strings and lantern. She dared not unroll it yet. They might still have to run for it. She glanced nervously from side to side, twisted round to see Shrimp, looked back at Medley, at Stark and at Farwalker and nearly jumped out of her skin when Bull hissed at her. She scurried over to him in time to see the grille topple forward. Bull caught it and lowered it silently to the ground.

Brat knelt and peered into the shaft, so dark after the sun-soaked, white-walled courtyard. It sloped gently downward and was easily wide enough for her. She might have difficulty in turning round, but it should be possible. She had no excuse to withdraw. There was no escape.

With dull acceptance, she crawled into the shaft and heard Bull replace the grille.

It was hard to tell how much time had passed. If it had not been for the gradual shortening of the candle in her close-lantern, Brat would not have known what time was in this endless place.

Twice she had retraced her thread almost to the grille, terrified that dusk had already fallen and she had missed Stark. Each time she had seen the sunlight glowing through the bars of the grille and had turned back.

She was sick with fear, filthy, tired, itching all over and her hands and knees and elbows were sore and grazed. Her water bottle was almost

empty in spite of her efforts to be saving, for the dust tickled her throat and made her cough so hard that, afraid of being heard, she had been forced to keep sipping the precious water.

Now she sniffed cautiously at the opening of a shaft she had not yet attempted. She had come to rely on her sense of smell to identify the possible destinations of these shafts. Most merely smelled of dust and these, she had confirmed, led to unused rooms and passages, usually totally empty but for carpets of dust. Others, smelling faintly of oil and leather, led to harness stores or guard quarters.

This one smelled of – Brat inhaled more deeply – rat dirt, human dirt and a faint taint of something rotting.

Shuddering, Brat decided that this shaft must lead to the dungeons. Her string was almost unwound, so she made up her mind to fasten the new one to the wall here, rather than knot two strings together. The longer the string was stretched, the more likely it was to break. Very carefully she bored a hole with her auger in the mortar between two stones at the mouth of the shaft. Then she gently tapped one of the nails from her pouch into the hole, muffling the noise of the small hammer with a fold of her scarf. She fastened the end of a new kite string to the nail, rewound the scarf about her face and crawled into the shaft.

It was narrower than those she had tried before, and it sloped downwards more steeply, but mercifully it was not very long. Brat caught a glint of metal in front of her and hastily shut the lantern. She felt her way along in total darkness until brought up short by bars. Her hand and arm would go between them, but not her shoulder. She could find no catch or fastening to the grid, which seemed reasonable for a dungeon but meant that she could go no further.

She felt about her as far as she could reach, afraid to risk even the briefest flash from her lantern, and discovered that this grating was set low down in a very rough wall. She barked her knuckles on the floor and scraped her hand and arm on the stone and then, drawing back too hastily, burned herself on the hot metal of the lantern. She drew in her breath with an involuntary hiss of pain and then froze.

A strange sound had broken the thick silence of the dungeon. Brat realised that pitch darkness did not mean there was no-one there. She could hear a chinking noise.

She listened, straining her ears and heard a distant thud. A door being flung open or shut, perhaps. As though in answer the clink-chink sounded again, quite near at hand. This time Brat recognised it, the sound of chains.

She had opened her mouth to call to the prisoner when she realised that she could now see the bars in front of her. A faint light had bloomed and was growing stronger, accompanied by slow heavy footsteps. Brat let out her breath, disgusted at her own slowness. Then it struck her that she might have made a fatal mistake if she had called out. Suppose the chained prisoner was not Graycat!

The moving light suddenly grew brighter and Brat blinked and squinted, twisting her neck awkwardly in her attempt to peer down the passage that now revealed itself. She could see only a narrow slice of it but she dared not press her face against the bars for fear of being noticed by whoever was approaching. But the footsteps went steadily past, stopped, and the lantern was set down on the floor, quite close to the grille. Brook drew back cautiously and listened harder than ever.

There was a muttered grumbling and heavy breathing, then a key grated in a lock and a door creaked open. The chains chimed and a heavier clanking noise was added. Brook thought that must be thicker chains, leg-irons, perhaps.

‘There’s another man on the far door,’ said a gruff voice, ‘and he’s got the key of it. I’ve no weapons either. So it won’t do you any good to attack me.’

‘All precautions, Sir Turnkey,’ said Gray’s voice, amused. ‘Am I so dangerous?’

‘I’m not to talk to you,’ the gruff voice sounded embarrassed, ‘except to give you his Lordship’s compliments and you got till this time tomorrow to change your mind and this is the last water you get and he’ll be down at dusk tomorrow for your answer.’

He reeled the message off all in a breath, without pause. Gray gave her almost silent chuckle and asked, ‘Am I to be deprived of your company also, friend?’

The warder hesitated, evidently mindful of his orders. ‘No, Lady,’ he said. ‘Me or one of the others will be on guard outside your door in case you change your mind sooner. We’re not to sleep and,’ the voice was lowered almost to a mumble, ‘we’re not to let you sleep.’

‘I see. Tell me, friend, what do you think of Lord Freetongue?’ said Gray, pleasantly.

‘I mayn’t talk to you! Except to wake you if you sleep!’ The warder sounded panic-stricken. He slammed the cell door with a violent clang, locked it and retreated a few paces down the corridor.

It sounded as though the door were mainly bars, thought Brat, unclenching her teeth and hands. She had been gripping the grating so hard that her fingers were bruised. If only the jailer had gone right away again! How could she possibly let Gray know now that she was here?

Then something the man had said came back to her. Gray was to have till this time tomorrow; and it would be dusk when Freetongue came to see her. So it must be dusk now! Frantically Brat began to wriggle backwards up the shaft. Stark would be in the courtyard very soon, backing her cart up against the wall above the entrance grid to cover Brook as she crawled out, if Brook was there in time to do so. The need to be silent as well as swift brought Brook to the verge of weeping with frustration. The lantern became an intolerable burden, the dust an increasing irritation and the pain in her burned hand and grazed limbs seemed worse than ever. And all the time her mind was insisting, ‘*Hurry! Hurry! Hurry!*’

Carter Stark noisily argued her way into the courtyard. ‘Well, if your Lord’s head cook has you dismissed, you’ll only have yourself to blame. Perishable goods is what the sign on this box says. See for yourself! And perishable means it won’t keep till tomorrow, right? So be good to yourself, friend, and open this gate!’

The guard gave in. He knew her and her cart, he could recognise the sign for perishable goods – you saw it all over Fish Street – and he knew better than to get on the wrong side of the head cook.

In the dim light he did not notice how closely Stark had jammed her cart tail against the wall. The skinny boy who was helping her handed out the large box and she set off for the kitchen, whistling loudly.

The boy took up the tune, perched on the side of the cart. After a moment, he hopped down and began to poke at one of the back wheels, still whistling shrilly.

CHAPTER TWENTY

To Brat, scrambling desperately along the shaft, that shrill whistle was the most heavenly music. She recognised the tune of *The Farmer's Daughter* that she and Baylock and Silverswift had sung on their journey and went limp with relief.

Shrimp was half under the cart, peering at the dark hole of the shaft entrance. She hissed at him softly and he at once scrambled across to the grille.

'Soon have you out,' he whispered eagerly. 'Did you find her?' Before Brat could reply, Shrimp cocked his head towards the nearest wall. 'Hear that? Sounds like the battle of Greenwall!'

Stark was speaking very loudly, over the furious voice of what must be the Head Cook. 'Well, all I know is, I was hired to bring it here. If you want it carted away again, you'll have to pay the cartage. I don't carry goods for fun, you know!'

Shrimp turned back, grinning, to the grille and was startled to have his wrist grabbed through the bars by a frantic Brat.

'Never mind getting me out!' she hissed. 'You've got to listen to me and remember, Shrimp!'

'I can listen and pull,' said Shrimp, freeing himself. Then he hesitated. Brat sounded quite desperate.

'No! Leave the grille! I must stay here. Tell them I've found Gray. She is in a cell, in chains. I don't think she is chained to the wall, but she is certainly manacled and I think in leg-irons as well. I couldn't see her, only hear. There is a man on guard outside her cell and another guarding the only door into the passage.'

She paused, arranging her thoughts. 'Now, this is very important. Freetongue is coming to her cell at dusk tomorrow. This will be just before he leaves for the Gathering, obviously. So if I go back I shall know exactly when he sets off. I can then return here and signal with my lantern. The guard won't see because he faces the road. And so Farwalker will know for sure when to come for her. And, Shrimp, I'm not sure it is safe to tell

Farwalker this, but Gray is to have no water and no sleep until Freetongue visits her.'

Shrimp drew in his breath sharply. 'What about food and water for you?' he said practically.

'I'll not die of it,' said Brat, trying to ignore the thirst that was already drying her throat. She tried not to think about another whole day in the dusty shafts.

'Wait!' Shrimp crawled rapidly away and vanished. Brat strained her ears but could hear only the quarrel between the cook and Stark. It had now progressed to the cook's ancestry and Stark's probable destination. She was listening with admiration to Stark's flights of fancy when Shrimp reappeared, panting.

'Here!' He poked the neck of a bottle between the bars. 'Quick, fill your flask from this!' Fumbling and spilling some of the precious water, Brat obeyed. Shrimp passed some pasties through the grille, warning her, 'Mind your fingers! I hope they're properly cooked.' Brat almost dropped them. They were very hot indeed.

'You took them out of the oven right under the cook's nose? Shrimp, you're wonderful!'

Shrimp grinned. Brat could just see the flash of his teeth in the gloom. 'Listen,' he said eagerly, 'I think we ought to have some sort of signal during the day. You be here at midday and we'll get in touch somehow, in case there is some change in the plans. And when you signal at dusk, make it three flashes, pause, and then three more.'

'Yes. Agreed.' Brat breathed, already feeling alone and abandoned.

'I must go. Here's Stark coming. Uh – good fortune attend you, Brook Storyteller!'

'And you, Strongtower!' called Brat as loudly as she dared.

Shrimp was so startled that he stood up too quickly and caught himself a smart crack on the bottom of the cart. He climbed dazedly up onto the driving seat, rubbing his bruised head and whispering his new name to himself, awe-struck. Shrimp Streetskimmer had been Storyteller-Named!

Stark came stomping back with the box, having allowed herself to be outshouted and convincingly browbeaten by the cook, and shot him an anxious glance. Dumping the box over the cart's tail, she yelled as if taking out her own frustration on her apprentice, 'Are you asleep, boy?'

What do you think you're doing?' Then, swinging up to the driving bench added softly, 'Where is she? What's happened?'

'Tell you later. Drive on; we can't talk here,' muttered Shrimp. The cart clattered and swayed out of the yard.

Brat had plenty of time during the following night and morning to wonder how the Fellowship could possibly communicate with her at noon. Stark's fake delivery would never work twice. And they would surely not risk repeating the invasion of the courtyard that had got her into the shaft so smoothly. Such luck could not last.

She grew more and more doubtful that any message would even be attempted. All the same, she spent most of the morning near the shaft entrance, having checked the dungeon twice, each time finding no changes, apart from a different man on duty and louder shouting at Gray to keep her awake.

She could not bear to listen, and crept back to the mouth of the shaft. She made the excuse to herself that her candles must be saved for the signalling at dusk. Oddly, she no longer felt any fear of the shafts.

Precisely at midday someone a little way down the street began to play some sort of stringed instrument. It had a twangy sound, insistent and carrying, but the tune was one Brat knew as a pipe accompaniment to one of the Southern ballads. She could not remember ever hearing the words, but surely it was a rather sad song about a man dying of love?

Then a voice joined in,

*'Lord Strongarm never pity knew
Nor grace had never given;
He took all men who broke his laws
And hanged them high as heaven.*

*Young Longcast was a widow's son
He crossed Lord Strongarm's border...'*

The voice was drowned for a few minutes by a sudden burst of talk in the courtyard and a clatter of hooves passing in the road. Then it rang out again clearly, growing louder for a couple of stanzas and then gradually fainter as the singer moved away.

*'She's called his kin, she's called his clan,
She's called his Guild together,*

*'Oh, you must save my son today
Or else he's lost forever!'*

*They've sworn an oath to save her son
And sent throughout the City,
'Let all the folk come swiftly here;
We'll rouse Lord Strongarm's pity!'*

*Lord Strongarm called his little page,
'What sound is this I'm hearing?
Is it the sea that is rising fast,
Or a thunderstorm that's nearing?'*

*'My Lord, ten thousand city folk
Stand all around your dwelling
They ask you for young Longcast's life;
My Lord, the crowd's still swelling! '*

*Lord Strongarm never pity knew
Nor grace had never given
Until his Hold surrounded was
And his defenses riven! '*

The voice died away in the distance and Brat set herself to sorting out what it meant. At the first mention of Lord Strongarm she had pricked up her ears, and the name Longcast confirmed her guess. This was the Story called *The Triumph of Southhill City*, or sometimes, *Lord Strongarm's Defeat*, hastily scrambled into ballad form – she was positive it had never been sung before – and mated to an existing tune popular in the south.

Since the Story was of a whole city defying its Lord in order to rescue a condemned prisoner, it was not one which was normally told in the hearing of Lordsmen. Certainly no-one would sing a version right outside a Hold! So it was definitely intended as a message for her, and the message could only be that Farwalker intended to raise a mob to help rescue Gray. But why?

Brat went over the story again. Yes! Of course! The Lord was in his Hold when the mob laid siege to it. Farwalker must mean that the mob was intended as a diversion if Freetongue did not leave for the Gathering on time. Would they actually attack or just try to draw Freetongue out? No

matter. She was warned. Now she would go back to the dungeon shaft, ready to report Lord Freetongue's departure.

Time passed very slowly for Brat. But how much more slowly, she told herself, for Gray, who had had no food or drink or sleep for so long! Her own flask was again empty and her mouth was dry.

The pasties were only a happy memory; but she had slept and was now, if not at her best, at least in reasonable working order.

Gray was not.

When Freetongue finally appeared, heralded by much door banging and clanking of arms, Brat could hear only the faintest of mumbles from Gray's cell.

Brat listened tensely.

'Get this door open!' snarled a voice.

'Yes, my Lord! At once, my Lord!' The warder fumbled in his haste to obey.

'Begging your Lordship's pardon, I think the Lady's fainted,' said another guard.

'Then pour water over her!' ordered Freetongue. 'Kick her! She's faking!'

There was a splash, then several thuds. Gray gave a shuddering moan and was silent. Brat dug her nails into her palms and bit her lip viciously to stop herself sobbing with rage and grief, while tears trickled dustily down her cheeks.

The Lord must have done some kicking himself. He sounded breathless. 'Now, listen to me, woman! You swear to wed me, swear by your Name or you can lie here till you rot!'

Silence.

'Very well! Guard, you can go. Leave that crow's bait on the floor. I'll be back later!'

Then the lights and noise went away.

Brat tried to rouse herself. She must get back to the entrance to signal to Farwalker, she must hurry, he would be waiting... She pushed herself backwards up the shaft and was almost at the top when Gray's voice below suddenly said softly, 'Who is there?'

Brat gasped in total shock, reared up reflexively, and hit her head a violent blow on the roof of the shaft. Stunned, she slid limply back down the shaft to the bottom.

There were voices in the dream. Brat tried to push the blanket aside and wondered why her head hurt so badly. It was dark. Perhaps her eyes were shut. The voices grew louder and it was not so dark any more. Brat wished they would not argue so loudly and shut her eyes again.

Then the sounds jumped into focus and she could understand what the voices were saying. A clear authoritative voice said firmly, 'The Overlord requires the attendance of the Lady Quicksilver. The Lady is a prisoner here. You say this is your only prisoner?'

Gruff-voice muttered assent.

'Then...' the first voice broke off and began again, '...this one is called Bearslayer, Captain of the Overlord's guards. Does this one address the Lady Quicksilver?'

Gray's voice, husky and not quite so clear as usual. 'This one is called Quicksilver. The Overlord wishes it, therefore the Lady Quicksilver attends upon him at once.'

There was a clank as she moved forward, and Bearslayer saw the chains for the first time as the narrow beam from the lantern fell on her.

He exclaimed furiously and turned on the warder. 'Who has dared to set chains upon the Lady Quicksilver?'

'Orders! My Lord's orders!' gasped the warder.

'Leave the wretch be,' said Gray. 'How should he know me? He obeyed his orders, as was his duty. Come, we must go to the Overlord.'

'But the Lady Quicksilver cannot go chained to the Court!'

'I suppose you have some sort of conveyance waiting? I can make shift to walk to it. As for the Court, Lord Freeforest is there. He holds the only keys to these chains,' said Gray, calmly.

Brat suddenly realised that Gray was going; the Overlord had saved her. But what of Brat? 'Gray!' she croaked. 'Graycat! Here!' and thrust her arm between the bars.

By the time the grating had been prised away from the wall and Brat freed, Bearslayer was frantic for them to hurry. Ignoring him, Brat and Gray, examining each other anxiously, said in chorus, 'Are you all right?' and Brat found herself giggling weakly.

'I hit my head,' she said, 'but you, Gray, you must...' She turned to Bearslayer. 'The Lady Quicksilver has had neither food nor water nor rest for more than a day,' she told him. 'You can spare her the time for a drink of water!'

‘I drank some of the water they poured over me,’ said Gray, mildly. ‘But we do both need a drink. And I’d like to bathe my wrists.’ She held out her hands. There was blood gleaming darkly on the cuffs of the manacles. It had dripped onto the chains that joined them together.

While the warder fetched drinking water and Bearslayer tore up his scarf to bandage Gray’s wrists, Brat hastily told her all she knew or had deduced of Farwalker’s plans. Gray frowned.

‘He will ruin all if he raises the mob,’ she said. ‘And I may not seek him myself; I must go straightway to the Overlord. Can you find him, Brat, once out of here?’

‘Perhaps. I can try.’

‘Tell him I am safe. Say he must not attack either Freetongue or the Gathering. Skies! If only...’

‘It’s my fault,’ said Brat miserably, ‘for not signalling. He’ll think Freetongue is still here. And it was my idea, that signal!’

‘Not your fault, Storyteller, your misfortune,’ said Gray firmly.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

There was a light coach waiting at the main gate of the Hold. Captain Bearslayer had draped his own long black silver-lined guardsman's cloak over Graycat's shoulders in order to hide the chains. He helped her up the step into the coach, shielding her from view as far as possible. The leg-irons clanked loudly.

Gray suppressed a laugh and said to Brook, 'Get in, Brat. You can ride as far as Thousand Statue Avenue at least.'

The coach wheels rumbled, the doors rattled, the horse's hooves clattered and the house walls each side of them echoed the sound back; but even so the noise of the distant mob reached them before they sighted the great Avenue. Inside the coach it was too dark for them to see each other. Bearslayer shifted uneasily and stood up to put his head out of the window. He drew back hastily.

'Lady, the Avenue is blocked. The crowd is too thick for us to pass! What would your Ladyship have us do?'

Gray was calm. 'Which way is the crowd moving?'

'Towards the Great House.'

'Tell the driver to go with the crowd, then, if it is possible. You must stay with us now, Brat,' she added. 'I was afraid we should be too late.'

As they moved forward into the crowd, enough light was reflected into the coach from torches carried by the mob for Brat to see Bearslayer's anxiety.

'These folk are dangerous,' he told them. 'The carriage could be attacked, overturned, even.'

'Captain,' Gray said reassuringly, 'the responsibility is mine, now.'

A moment later, the horse whinnied loudly, the driver shouted and the carriage jerked backwards and halted. Outside the windows the twilight was shot with flickers of fire from the torches and all around them rose the sea sound of a great crowd. Brat, already as tense as a lute string, felt her nerves stretch to breaking point.

But Gray's voice was almost placid. 'I suspect that we must walk now.'

As she spoke, the coach door was jerked open and an excited young man holding a torch sprang up on to the step and peered in, shouting, 'Any more Lords and Ladies?' in a fierce, mocking voice.

Brat shot to her feet, shielding Gray and Bearslayer from view. Her face was still well smeared with the dust of the ventilation shafts, her clothes were in equally filthy rags and her hair hung in rats-tails. The young man drew back in astonishment and Brat grinned at him.

'Who asks?' she said, pitching her voice to carry clearly, Storyteller fashion. Those in the crowd who had surrounded the coach as soon as it stopped began to call out and laugh, some at Brat, some at the young man.

He, recovering himself somewhat, shouted, 'Out of the way, you brat! Let's see who's hiding in there!'

'You have my name; let you now give me yours!' retorted Brat, unmoving. 'Or shall I name you? What shall it be? Gapeseed? Wildman? Firebrain?'

Their audience was delighted and several voices volunteered other suggestions.

From behind Brook, Gray spoke softly, the sound just reaching her ear, 'Brat, introduce him to me, to Graycat. Loudly. Then step down and I will show myself.'

Brat gasped, reached a hand back towards Gray and heard the chains chinking as her hand was clasped encouragingly.

'I am called Freeborn!' the young man shouted. 'And I demand...'

Without effort Brat's trained Storyteller voice overtopped his.

'Then, Freeborn, I present the one you so much wish to meet.' She half turned to the coach's interior, gesturing as widely as possible in the confined space, paused for a carefully judged moment, then at full volume cried, 'Graycat!' and dropped to the ground beside the step on which Freeborn still stood.

Graycat ducked through the coach doorway and stood up to her full height, poised in the opening. She had to catch at the swinging door to keep her balance and the chains clanked at her ankles and chimed at her wrists. The cloak fell back from her shoulders, framing her in silver brilliance. Torchlight jumping from the bright links swinging from her hands, made them appear as barbaric ornaments. Only one side of her face was lit, giving her an oddly blank expression.

Freeborn, stupefied, stepped backward, fell off the coach step and crashed to the ground. Even as he fell, Gray snatched the torch from his hand and moved deliberately down onto the step he had so clumsily vacated. Brat, watching, longed to help her. She knew what effort must have gone into that smooth controlled movement. Could Gray manage the much longer step down to the ground?

She did not try. She stood still, holding the torch so that she was fully lit, waiting for the amazement of the noisy crowd to subside – and masking the interior of the coach completely. More and more people were pressing round as the word was passed from one to another. Freeborn, Brook noticed, was in danger of being trampled and she ducked forward to drag him awkwardly to his feet, only just in time. They stood pressed together, jammed into place by the jostling crowd and, in Brook's case, scarcely able to breathe.

For a moment she felt panicky. Then Freeborn's arm came round her, forcing a tiny space in the crush. She gave a gasp of relief and twisted round to thank him. Before she could speak he lowered his head to say fiercely into her ear, 'That is really Graycat?'

Brat nodded. 'Who else could it be?' she demanded proudly.

'Farwalker believes her imprisoned or dead. But she's here! And in chains!' Freeborn jerked to another movement of the crowd and tried to press back as they were both forced against the coach. Brat cried out in pain as a sharp edge of the step dug viciously into her arm and at once Gray's voice came to her rescue. 'Friends, I beg you to move back! You will kill my comrade with your pressure!'

Reluctantly, the crowd eased back. Graycat smiled her thanks and began to speak in a carrying voice but in an almost conversational manner as if what she said was an everyday matter of only casual interest.

'I am summoned by our Overlord. May I have passage?'

A great clamour of voices arose. Under cover of the noise, Brat hissed, 'Where is Farwalker? Has... is he trying to storm the Lord Freetongue's Hold?'

Freeborn shrugged. 'I don't know. He was deathly quiet. He wouldn't say what he intended himself.'

Brat shivered. So Farwalker had remained in his remote fury ever since he had sent her into Freetongue's dungeons, seeing her simply as a weapon to be used. In that mood he might do anything at all. He had set off this

riot and left it to work and whether it merely distracted attention or whether it destroyed half the City would not matter to him. Even if Brat could get out of this crowd now she was already too late. She wanted to scream, to fight her way out of this surging mass, to run – or to tell Gray. But Gray knew Farwalker. She knew this crowd was his doing. How would she deal with it?

She was already dealing with it. As the first clamour died, she said, slowly and distinctly, ‘My first duty is to attend my Overlord. Will my friends give me their escort?’

A great roar went up and the crowd parted, leaving space around the coach door. Freeborn at once moved forward, holding out his arm so that Gray might grasp it as she stepped smoothly down to the ground. Her effort showed hardly at all but Freeborn went tense as her weight and the weight of the chains rested on him.

With a shock Brat realised that Gray meant to walk the rest of the way. ‘In those chains! She’ll never manage it! Not even Graycat... She’s drawing them off Bearslayer! That’s why!’

Graycat walked steadily forward, the crowd parting as she came, the looping chains swinging from her wrists, the hobbling links between her ankles clanking with every slow, wide-stepping stride.

At her shoulder paced Freeborn carrying the torch once more. As Brat fell in behind them, she heard herself say aloud,

‘An Overlord in chains

Who still the chains disdains

And even though a prisoner bound, walks free!’

There was an amazed gasp from Freeborn, a pace in front of her, and a sudden silence followed by a sibilance of whispers from all around them.

Behind them, forgotten, Bearslayer leaned out of the carriage as soon as the crowd thinned and told the driver, in a voice that sounded strange to his own ears, to drive as fast as possible to the Great House, using the by-ways. To himself he said, almost wistfully, ‘I may yet be able to serve her.’

Farwalker, with Scathe slung at his shoulder, moved swiftly and silently through the dim streets. The roar of his aroused mob was growing louder as he and they converged on the Overlord’s Great House.

Farwalker intended to get there well ahead of the riot. With his mind firmly shut to all fears for Graycat’s safety or Brat’s mission, he

concentrated on moving as quickly and as unobtrusively as possible. From time to time he put up a hand to touch the great bow or check the quiver full of arrows at his back, but always without pausing or slackening his pace.

Most of the attention of the guards of the Great House was on the gates, where they expected the mob to arrive at any moment, so Farwalker was able to scale the wall without interference. It wasn't easy. The wall was high and smooth and he was badly hampered by Scathe.

Once in the Great House grounds he made his way in short, cautious rushes from one group of bushes to another, gradually nearing the north side of the building where there were the fewest lights showing.

He had to wait through some nerve-racking minutes while a group of guards marched round the building on the ceremonial search that always preceded a Great Gathering of the Landholders; but the close-lanterns they carried served mainly to show their position to Farwalker, and he hugged the ground and watched them pass safely by.

Then he began a careful search for some way in.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Bearslayer managed to reach the Great House before the mob. He gave certain orders to the guards at the gate and, as a result, they saluted Graycat when she arrived and allowed several of the crowd in after her, Brat and Freeborn among them.

The doorwardens at the main entrance to the House, however, would not allow anyone bearing arms to enter. Graycat backed the guards, telling her followers firmly that there could be no need for weapons since none might bear arms in the Overlord's presence, not even his household guards.

Most of her followers refused to hand over their weapons and were left by the entrance. But Freeborn gave up his dagger and a nasty-looking short bludgeon. Brat had no weapons. Another three handed over knives, an iron-shod staff and a set of knuckle-dusters.

The doorwardens bowed them through. 'Like as if we were Lords!' preened one of them. They followed Graycat up the wide flight of stairs to the High Chamber.

Bearslayer met them at the doorway. He was still a little breathless as he asked formally, 'How will the Lady be announced?'

Graycat smiled at him. 'Announce the Lady Quicksilver, called Graycat, only child and Heir of Ironmind, Lord of the Dales,' she told him.

So the doors of the High Chamber were flung back and Bearslayer announced the outlaw Graycat in a voice that filled the huge room.

The Overlord in his Great Chair, thin almost to transparency, leaned forward a little to gaze at Graycat but gave no sign of surprise as, in a clashing of chains, she moved stiffly into the room.

Many of the Lords and Ladies gathered in the High Chamber, however, reacted with amazement, outrage or fear. Some rose to their feet in protest and two of those nearest the doors started forward as if to dispute Gray's presence.

The doorwardens, standing to attention under Bearslayer's eye, ignored them, as did Graycat. Bearslayer, bowing her in, trod backward heavily

upon the toes of the foremost Lord who, in trying to escape the pain, half fell against the other and removed them both from Gray's path.

Slipping in behind Gray, Brat stifled a giggle and saw that one of the doorwardens was also trying not to laugh. They exchanged appreciative glances, then Brat stepped full into the High Chamber and gazed around her, eager to absorb all she saw and heard.

This she must remember and record and be able to tell when the time came. This would be a Story indeed!

Beside the Overlord's Great Chair stood an elderly man. He was by no means as old as the Overlord but he had something of the same fine-drawn look, like a coin worn with much handling. His position beside the Overlord told Brat that he must be Lord Buckler, the Overlord's Trustman. Her own eyes and memory told her that he was the shabby stranger she had once nearly bowled over, the one Gray had told her she must never allow others to see that she knew.

So Brat's gaze travelled on around the Chamber. The Lords, Ladies and Landholders on either side blazed with colours and jewels, but the Overlord and his Trustman were dressed in plain black and the only jewel between them was the great crystal which shone from the tip of the short Staff of Office that the Overlord held in his right hand.

The Lords all stirred and muttered, but the Overlord and Lord Buckler stayed perfectly still, silent, both gazing fixedly at Graycat.

She stood, equally still, in the centre of the open space between the rows of Lords, patiently, gazing back at the Overlord. At last the murmurs subsided. One last indignant voice floated up,

'...rabble from the streets now!' and was hastily hushed.

Then the Overlord spoke into the silence. 'Let the daughter's daughter of the Overlord's sister be welcome. Why comes the Lady Quicksilver in chains to answer her Overlord's summons?'

Somehow Graycat managed a graceful reverence, dropping slowly to one knee and rising again with no sign of strain. Brat, watching, caught her breath. She had felt the weight of those chains. It seemed impossible that Gray could kneel at all, let alone move so smoothly and gracefully.

Her voice as she replied to the Overlord was as calm as ever. 'The Lady Quicksilver obeys the brother of her mother's mother. The woman Graycat had no time to shed her chains before answering the Overlord's summons.'

‘Wherefore and by whom was Graycat chained?’ asked the Overlord. Slowly, Graycat turned, scanning the rows of Lords and Ladies. Brat, scarcely daring to breathe, was reminded that Gray Silverswift was a member of the Actors’ Guild. This dramatic pause to search was not strictly needful, for Graycat had undoubtedly marked her enemy as she walked to the room’s centre. She was now simply making her audience wait to increase the tension.

The slow scan ceased. Graycat stared, chin up, eyes slitted, at a youngish Lord. He was not unhandsome. If he had been at his ease he might have been good-looking, but now fear stretched the skin over his cheek bones and drew back his lips into a snarling grimace.

‘By the Lord Freeforest. His intention was to force the Lady Quicksilver into marrying him and so delivering up her inheritance. He,’ stated Graycat in a clear, indifferent voice, ‘would be Lord of the Dales as well as of the Great Forest’ she paused, then, very slowly in a voice full of venom, ‘he bears my curse!’

Those near her drew back involuntarily and Freeforest himself started to his feet. ‘No! Witch!’ he cried out in a high shaken voice. He clutched at the jewel he wore at his throat and shivered.

Graycat turned back to the Overlord. Freeforest, as a subject for consideration, was dismissed. Her own breach of etiquette in discarding the Courtly Mode in the Overlord’s presence was likewise dismissed and ignored. The Lady Quicksilver awaited her Overlord’s pleasure.

In response to a small sign from the Overlord, Lord Buckler left his place to speak to Captain Bearslayer who had taken up his correct position near the Great Chair. Everyone watched as Bearslayer, his shoes creaking in the silence, marched down the ranks of Lords until he reached Freeforest.

‘The keys, if it please the Lord Freeforest,’ he said implacably. Very plainly it did not please Freeforest. But slowly, reluctantly, he reached into his belt pouch and disentangled two keys.

Bearslayer waited with deadly patience until they were dropped into his outstretched palm, then he marched briskly across to Graycat and knelt to unlock the leg irons.

Even when the manacles also clattered to the floor Graycat did not move. She stood calmly in the pool of chains, her eyes on the Overlord.

Bearslayer stepped back, bowed to her, punctiliously returned the keys to Freeforest and went back to his post.

The Overlord said, 'Let the Lady Quicksilver take her rightful place as Lady of the Dales.'

Graycat bowed low and said, 'The Lady Quicksilver will hold and keep those lands at the Overlord's command and in the Overlord's service,' and stepped away from the chains.

There was an empty bench by one of the older Lords and she was moving towards it when Freeforest suddenly shouted, 'Quicksilver – Graycat – is outlawed! An outlaw can inherit nothing!'

Graycat looked up at the Overlord, spreading her hands slightly in enquiry. A nod gave her permission and she turned to address the whole Court.

'Graycat was outlawed for a term of seven years. This was proclaimed seven years, one month and five days ago.' Then she seated herself beside the old Lord.

There was another murmur among the Lords but no-one appeared willing to act as spokesman until one thin old Lady with brilliant black eyes rose.

'Is it now permitted for the streets to pour out their rabble even into the Overlord's High Chamber?' she asked, gently but distinctly. She did not look at the little group by the door, but almost everyone else did.

Brat, very conscious of how she stood out, so young and so bedraggled, longed to slip back out of the room. But the doors were shut and, besides, she was Graycat's Witness here, even if Gray did not know it yet.

So she stood as straight as she could, braced her shoulders, put on her Storyteller face and stared proudly ahead. Freeborn tossed his head and snorted in a way that reminded Brat strongly of her grandmother's stubborn pony faced with a steep hill. The other three looked uneasily around and the woman whispered anxiously to one of the men.

'The Overlord chooses whom he will receive in his High Chamber,' the Overlord said icily. 'Let Lady Jewel remember that while the Lords are answerable to the Overlord, the Overlord is answerable to the people.'

He paused and Brat, forgetting to look proud and detached, stared in amazement at the Lady. Was this the Lady Jewel of whom Great-uncle Silkentongue spoke so highly? Surely not!

The Overlord was speaking again and she wrenched her attention back to him. His tone was less cold. 'Let those of the people here present state their names and titles that no-one shall miscall them.'

There was an awkward pause as each of the five waited for one of the others to begin. At last Freeborn took a pace forward and spoke. Slowly, for the Courtly Mode did not come easily to his tongue, he said, 'This one is called Freeborn, Horsemaster. I – uh – this one is here to bear witness for the people who wait without.' He gave a sigh of relief and stepped back. Given this formula, the others followed suit, giving their names and Guild or occupation just as he had done.

Brat, last of all, deliberately broke the mould.

'Brook, called Brat, Storyteller; daughter to Storyteller Weaveword, Remembrancer and Witness to Graycat, Lady Quicksilver,' she announced in her most carrying voice. 'Here in attendance upon the Lady of the Dales!'

Her partisanship thus clearly stated, she stepped back and stared defiantly at Lady Jewel who, to her surprise, gave her a quick smile and the ghost of a wink.

Brat was puzzled. Had the Lady then intended not to pour scorn on the intruders but to remind the Court that the people had to be reckoned with? And was the Overlord doing the same?

Then she nearly jumped out of her skin. The Overlord was addressing her!

'Storyteller!' he said, commandingly. Brat started forward, tried to speak, then bowed instead. 'Let Brook Storyteller,' said the Overlord, 'tell to this noble Gathering *The Story of Skywatcher and Whitehawk*.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Brook gulped. She knew the Story but had never told it. It was one of the Great Stories that Weaveword had said she was too young to tell properly; and here was the Overlord commanding her to tell it before all the Lords and Ladies of the Joined Lands!

‘Suppose I didn’t know it?’ she thought resentfully. ‘He’d look silly then! Or no, I’d look silly; I can’t imagine him looking silly whatever happened.’

She found that her feet were taking her up the room to the Overlord’s Chair. She looked around anxiously. She would have to sit on the step in front of the Chair, but at the same time she must not turn her back on the Overlord!

Then she saw Bearslayer motioning to her, pointing out an angle where she could sit and still not turn her back either to the Overlord or to her audience. She bowed very low to the Overlord, bowed again to the Gathering and sat down, cross-legged and straight-backed in the traditional Storyteller’s pose.

‘Let all here present listen and hear *The Story of Skywatcher and Whitehawk*,’ she announced. Her voice sounded thin in her own ears, but the sound carried well in this Chamber and the fact that she could still, in her state of subdued panic, think of this made her feel more confident. She swallowed hard and began.

‘It needs not to tell this company how, as a young child, Skywatcher was borne away to safety by Bonesteel, his father’s Trustman, after the cruel murder of his father, the Overlord Eagle-eye. Nor is it needful to tell of all the adventures that befell him in exile until the day when he returned with an army of exiled followers and foreign knights to fight the great battle of Ridgefell against the Usurper Overlord. It was a very terrible battle and many were the fierce fighters slain on either side, but at last the Usurper was killed and Skywatcher’s army was victorious. Then Skywatcher gave orders that any of the Lords yet alive should be brought before him. Many indeed had survived where the common soldiers

perished, for their mail protected them and saved their lives. They were led before the young warrior Overlord Skywatcher, and to each he put the question, 'Did you swear allegiance aforetime to my father Eagle-eye?'

'Most of the older Lords had to answer 'Yes'. To them Skywatcher said, 'There shall be no forsworn treachers as Lords in this my Land. Let those who were forsworn choose now between exile and death.'

'Some chose death, that their heirs might inherit; others went into exile and were allowed to take some of their possessions. Their children had to go with them and lose their inheritances. The new Overlord dared not give any of them another chance. 'A man who will break faith once will break faith twice,' he said.

'The younger Lords, who had come into their land-holdings after the death of Eagle-eye and so had never sworn allegiance to him, Skywatcher spared; but he made them ransom their lands by payment of a great fine, with their lives as forfeit if they did not pay. He needed the money to reward those who had followed him into exile and to pay off his foreign army.

'Now there was one young Lord, Whitehawk, whose land-holding had been struck by drought for several years in succession. He had sold almost all he had of treasure and of gear to keep his people alive and so he was not able to pay his ransom immediately. He therefore begged Skywatcher for time to raise the money.

Skywatcher told him to send to his kindred for help, but Whitehawk had no near kin and must needs go himself to pledge his credit with the merchants. The other young Lords were being held by the Overlord Skywatcher until their ransoms should be delivered so when Whitehawk alone sought leave to travel to raise his ransom, the new Overlord asked, 'What warranty can you give for your return?'

'And Whitehawk replied simply, 'My word.'

'At this, the Overlord Skywatcher looked round at his friends and at the foreign Lords who stood near him and saw that the foreigners expected him to refuse to trust Whitehawk's word.

This angered him and he said to Whitehawk, 'Very well. Two month's grace shall you have, Lord Whitehawk. At the end of that time, if you have not paid your ransom, your life shall be forfeit.'

'So Whitehawk set out to find his ransom. But all the traders knew of his land's impoverishment and one after another they refused to advance

him the money. All the friends who might have helped him were gathering their own ransoms or fled into exile and it seemed to Whitehawk that he must die. But at last he found a trader who had received kindnesses at the hands of Whitehawk's father and who, in friendship, lent him the whole of the sum he needed without interest. Nevertheless, Whitehawk had to bind himself to repay the money by a certain date and sign a bond mortgaging all the lands in his personal possession.

'Then, with only a few days yet remaining of his two months' grace, he set out with his ransom for the City where the new Overlord now held his Court.

'A day's journey away, he came upon a Lady. She was sitting by the side of the road, weeping most bitterly, while round her stood servingmen and maids, some wounded, all dusty and travel-stained.

'Whitehawk reined in his horse and asked one of the men what was the trouble. Hearing his voice, the Lady rose and came to his stirrup. Whitehawk dismounted at once, recognising her as the Lady of one of the other Lords awaiting ransom. She was clearly with child and near her time and Whitehawk, seeing her in such distress, feared for her and for the babe.

'She told him that she had been collecting her Lord's ransom and now, almost within sight of the City, she had been attacked by an armed band and the ransom money stolen.

"My Lord will be slain," she wept. 'I cannot go back to seek another ransom in time. My babe will never see his father.'

'Whitehawk said to himself, 'How much more depends upon this man's life than upon mine! His Lady may well die and the child with her if he is not saved.'

'So he made the Lady take all the money that he had raised with such difficulty and he rode away in a last effort to get more. He had only three days left and no hope at all.

'At the end of the three days, Whitehawk rode into the City and sought audience with the Overlord.

'When he was admitted, 'May it please the Overlord's Grace,' he said, 'this one has not been able to raise enough money to ransom his life and therefore must surrender his body to the mercy of the Overlord.'

'Skywatcher was surprised. 'Surely Lord Whitehawk could find some trader to lend him money?'

‘Whitehawk agreed that he had indeed borrowed the money. ‘It has to be repaid out of the revenues of this one’s land,’ he admitted. ‘May it be the Overlord’s pleasure to let the repayments be made according to the bond here shown?’

“Where, then, is the money?’ demanded Skywatcher.

‘Whitehawk replied, ‘It was given to one who had greater need of it than Whitehawk.’

‘Then the Overlord made Whitehawk tell him and his Court all that had happened. They sent for the Lady to confirm his tale, and she came at once, although her babe had been born only two days before. When she saw Whitehawk, ignoring the Overlord and all the Court, she fell down upon her knees before the young Lord and kissed his hand, saying, ‘I am your debtor for life, Lord Whitehawk, I and my son and my son’s father.’

‘At that, Skywatcher looked slowly around at all his Court. Then he took a jewelled brooch from his shoulder and placed it on the table where the ransoms were counted out. One of the foreign Lords pulled a ring from his finger and likewise laid it on the table. Then all the Lords in the hall came forward one after another and put purses of gold and jewels on the table until there was sufficient there to ransom Whitehawk twice over.

“I will not lose such a man as this for mere gold!’ said the Overlord Skywatcher.’

Brook paused, then rose and bowed to the Landholders and again to the Overlord.

‘That is *The Story of Skywatcher and Whitehawk*,’ she said with finality and made to step down into the body of the chamber.

The Overlord halted her. ‘Wait, Storyteller,’ then loudly, ‘let Brook Storyteller say what became of Whitehawk.’

Brook blinked at him, hastily running through her fund of Stories about the great Skywatcher. ‘When Bonesteel, who was Skywatcher’s Trustman as he had been Eagle-eye’s, died, Skywatcher asked Whitehawk to be his Trustman. Many years later in the battle of High Downs, Whitehawk was mortally wounded, taking a thrust intended for his Overlord. Whitehawk’s daughter,’ she added, suddenly seeing where all this was leading, ‘was the fore-mother of Ironmind, last Lord of the Dales.’

The Overlord looked round at his Lords and Ladies with a faint smile. ‘The business for which this Gathering was summoned may now begin,’ he announced.

Lord Buckler took a step forward. He held a scroll in his hands but barely glanced at it.

‘Be it known to all here present,’ he began sonorously, ‘that Overlord Strongmind, being now of an age when a man may expect death at any moment, and having no heir of his body, nor of his child’s body, and wishing above all things to leave the Joined Lands in peace after his death, now, at this Great Gathering and grave Council of all the Lords, Ladies, Landholders and Guildmasters of the Joined Lands, wills to declare the Heir who shall be Overlord after him.’

Although all present must have been expecting this, an awed murmur went round the High Chamber. Lord Buckler took a fresh grip on his scroll, cleared his throat and went on,

‘The Overlord has chosen one among you who has well-tested qualities of leadership, intelligence and courage, one who is still young and strong of body and mind.’ He paused, looked at the Overlord, took a deep breath and said loudly, his words echoing round the Chamber,

‘Let the Lady Graycat Quicksilver stand forth!’

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Recklessly, Farwalker flung open another door. He had long since lost his way among the unlit upper passages of the Great House and his frustration and raging fear for Graycat made him careless. Starrise had come, the Overlord must by now have entered the High Chamber and the Great Gathering begun. His chance to speak privately to the Overlord was lost. The maddening delays he had suffered in getting into the building had only made him more determined. He would not give up. He would invade the High Chamber and publicly demand help for Gray.

If only he knew where exactly he was! He had studied plans of the Great House and knew the public rooms and their layout but he was on an upper, unknown floor now and the stair down was eluding him.

Farwalker pushed his desperate anxiety for Graycat to the back of his mind and tried yet another door. A dazzle of light met him and he winced away from it, for a moment imagining that the Great House was on fire. Then he blinked furiously and the scene came into focus.

He had come out onto one of the galleries that ran all round the High Chamber, a whole storey above its floor.

The light of the torches showed him a stair from the gallery down into the High Chamber not far from where he crouched. Cautiously, gradually, he straightened. The light, he realised, actually hid him rather than revealing him to the Gathering below, for the torches flaring along the walls were set at little more than head height. Anyone looking up at the gallery would be unable to see past them at all clearly.

Even better, the gallery's solid waist-high balustrade threw deep shadows over him. If he kept still he was as good as invisible. He seemed to be about halfway along the right-hand side of the Chamber. To his left he could see the tall doors of the main entrance, the doorwardens beside them, and, standing a little nearer, three men and a woman. He squinted past the dazzle of light and was astonished. What was Freeborn doing here? Puzzled, he looked the other way, at the Overlord's dais, and was startled and bewildered at the sight of Brat, grubby, dishevelled and

looking the complete streetskimmer, solemnly seated on the steps in her best Storyteller's pose. He listened, aware now that he had been hearing her voice since he opened the gallery door.

Plainly, she was telling a Story and doing it as calmly and well as if she told Stories to the Court every day of her life. Farwalker's mouth twitched into a smile. He was proud of her.

Then he recognised the story and frowned. Only one person could be responsible. The Overlord himself must have ordered the telling of *Skywatcher and Whitehawk*. But why? He stared at the Overlord but could make nothing of that serene face. Then he craned cautiously forward to look at the Landholders opposite him.

In the middle of the open aisle between their ranks lay a pile of chains. Farwalker gazed at it in bewilderment. Chains? In the High Chamber? Graycat! Graycat had been chained, according to Brat's report. Brat was here, the chains were here... Graycat must surely be here, too! Brat was rising to her feet, the story completed, bowing, about to leave the dais steps. Then the Overlord stopped her. Farwalker was suddenly tense, straining to hear every word. A long sigh escaped him. So that was why the Overlord had called for *Skywatcher and Whitehawk*! Gray was indeed here. He scanned the rows of Lords and Ladies opposite. Nothing. She must be on this side of the Chamber, beneath him and out of his sight. He moved slowly, warily along the gallery towards the dais, still searching.

His attention was seized by Lord Buckler's announcement. His back hairs prickling with alarm, he swung round. His hands went to his bow. He had unslung her from his back, strung her with all the reflexive speed of his bowman's training and was reaching for an arrow before his conscious mind had caught up.

Danger! There was some dreadful danger close and getting closer. He was so sure of it that he set the arrow to the string and began to draw.

Lord Buckler reached his climax, 'Let the Lady Graycat Quicksilver, stand forth!' and Farwalker, leaning recklessly over the balustrade, saw a startled Graycat take a faltering step into the centre of the room.

Amazement made her for once clumsy. She trod too close to the heap of chains, caught her foot and stumbled. She recovered herself at once but even as she did so there was a sudden flash of movement at her back. Brat's voice shrieked out, 'Graycat! Behind you! It's poisoned!' and

Farwalker saw Lord Freeforest springing at Gray's unguarded back with something glittering in his outthrust hand.

Farwalker lifted Scathe and shot him.

Lord Freeforest went down on his back with the shaft through his shoulder, flattened to the floor like a swatted beetle. The tiny blade dropped from his hand. With a screech of frustrated rage he snatched it up left handed and drew the point across his wrist. At once his body convulsed, convulsed again and was still.

Graycat stood looking down at the twisted corpse. 'Oh, you poor fool!' she said sadly. Then, glancing up at the gallery, 'Farwalker?'

Over the rising din, as everyone in the Chamber seemed to surge forward at once, exclaiming, shouting, or having hysterics, Bearslayer thundered, 'Silence! Guards!'

The doorwardens sprang forward and the hubbub began to subside. The Overlord's thin voice cut through it.

'Freeforest has drawn a weapon in the High Chamber in the presence of his Overlord. His life is forfeit.'

Graycat turned. 'He has taken his own life,' she said soberly.

'The arrow did not kill him?' Gray shook her head.

'Where is the one who loosed that shaft?' The Overlord was fully in command once more. Farwalker came to himself with a start. He also had drawn a weapon in the Overlord's presence! His life was forfeit, too! He looked hastily back along the gallery to the door by which he had entered. The nearby stair leading to the floor of the Chamber was already being mounted by one of the doorwardens.

He could not reach it now before the man got there. Nor could he ever bring himself to shoot down the unarmed doorwarden. He looked over the rail again. The drop to the Chamber floor was too great for safety and even if he landed unhurt, he would be no better off in that crowded space.

But the Overlord's dais... there was a small door at the back of it, presumably leading to the Overlord's private apartments. He made up his mind. The height of the dais would reduce the drop almost to safety point and the dais itself was all but empty. He began to run.

Brat still stood rigid on the step of the dais. From the moment when she had seen Freeforest leap up and had realised that the jewel he had been clutching at his breast was no jewel but a knife too small to be useful unless it were envenomed, time had slowed for her. She had watched as

Gray stumbled and recovered, agonisingly slowly, and Freeforest flung himself forward; and she had seemed to have plenty of time to calculate that nobody was near enough to save Graycat, that no-one else had noticed Freeforest and that all she could do was to yell her warning as loudly as possible.

She even had time to decide on the wording. Gray must be warned of poison, not merely of an attack or she might brush against that wicked little blade unknowingly. So Brat screamed with all her might, terribly aware that she was very likely too late already, ‘Graycat! Behind you! It’s poisoned!’ And saw a thunderbolt strike the assassin down. She stood frozen, staring, her arm still raised to point out the danger, unable to take in what had happened. Then she saw Graycat look up at the gallery and, looking up herself, saw a dim movement in the shadows. One of the doorwardens was rushing up the stairway that led to the gallery, others were gathering around the Overlord to shield him from attack.

He put them firmly aside, tilted his head to the gallery and called, ‘Farwalker!’ in a suddenly resonant, commanding tone. Understanding came to Brat. Of course, it must be Farwalker up there. Who else would have dared such a shot in this place? And now he would be put to death. It was death to raise a weapon in the Overlord’s presence! A terrible tight bubble of rage and grief filled her chest and rose into her throat. It was intolerable, unbearable! It must not happen.

Long ago her father had told her, ‘A Storyteller must use everything his listeners give him and he himself holds. He must use himself and his emotions, strip himself naked – raw, if needful – but hold them!’

So Brat, with one corner of her mind assessing her audience, let the bubble in her throat swell and burst. She gave a great wail of misery and began to weep with howling sobs, almost deafening herself with the sound of her own grief and terror.

Gray was suddenly beside her, trying to calm her. Brat backed away, flailing her arms wildly and screamed, ‘No! Go away! I want Bay!’ and then, realising what she had said, cried louder than ever for the betrayal.

By now she had completely disrupted the hunt for Farwalker. The noise she was making and the sudden violent change from serene Storyteller to hysterical child had caught and held everyone’s attention. Even the Overlord left his chair to bend stiffly over her.

Brat, drawing a sobbing breath for another outburst, heard a sudden thud and the patter of running feet and, with the tiny part of her awareness still unoccupied by fear and misery, rejoiced that Farwalker was escaping. Then everyone was whirled away from her. Farwalker was holding her tightly, Scathe shrugged casually to the floor, saying urgently, 'Brat! Brat, stop it! You'll harm yourself!'

Brat flung her arms frantically around his neck. Between sobs she gasped in his ear, 'You should have run! Bay! why didn't you run?!' and clung tighter. Farwalker held her as closely. Over her head he watched the Overlord and the guards and smiled ruefully. Graycat came silently to his side and faced them equally.

Brat's sobs died into great sighs and occasional hiccups but she still clung to Farwalker and he made no move to detach her.

When the High Chamber was more or less quiet again the Overlord said thoughtfully, 'Farwalker. The Young Archer. No, I forgot. You are the Archer now, I believe? That was a very fine shot and a merciful one, Archer Farwalker. You drew to save a life even though by doing so you forfeited your own. And now you prove to me that you care more for your little ragamuffin here than for my justice. How say you, Farwalker?'

All round them grew an amazed silence. The Overlord had discarded the Courtly speech, even though the entire Court was still present! It was unheard of. Impossible! Gray's head was tilted alertly. She realised the implications of this change at once but Farwalker, unused to Courts and formalities, was much too shaken and weary to notice.

Without understanding it, however, he felt her sudden relaxation and let some of his own tension escape. He answered the Overlord in the same manner.

'It is true, Lord. I have forfeited my life. But I have saved Graycat – the Lady Quicksilver – the Young Overlord – and my own life is a small price to pay.' He spoke soberly and reasonably, as if they had been discussing some entirely neutral topic.

The Overlord smiled at him approvingly. 'She is not yet the Young Overlord,' he said softly. 'This Gathering must vote upon my choice.' Then, more loudly, 'You do not yet understand me, do you, Archer?'

Brat suddenly realised what the Overlord was doing. She loosed her grasp of Farwalker and said urgently, 'Bay, it's all right! The Overlord has

pardoned you! As soon as he stopped speaking in the Courtly manner, he dismissed the Court!’

Farwalker put her down and frowned.

‘Don’t you see?’ demanded Brat. ‘It is only at Court that no weapons may be borne in the Overlord’s presence! Otherwise, how could he lead his men in battle? Or even go hunting?’ She turned and fell on her knees before the Overlord.

‘I am Your Lordship’s most grateful servant for life,’ she said and lifted his hand to her forehead.

The Overlord took her hand. ‘Up, child! Of course he is pardoned. Shall I put my own soldiers to death upon the field of battle?’ He turned to the Gathering. ‘Lords, Ladies, Landholders, Guildmasters! Are we all agreed that Lord Freeforest deserved death as a traitor?’ A cheer answered him. ‘Then, since the lands of a traitor revert to the Overlord, his lands and title are the Overlord’s to bestow. Freeforest left no heir; so, with the agreement of this Gathering, the Archer, Lord Farwalker shall succeed to those lands to hold them for himself and his heirs.’

A murmur rose, grew, and became acclamation. Farwalker stood slack-jawed, utterly amazed, until Graycat nudged him.

‘The proper reply is ‘The Lord Farwalker will hold and keep the lands at the Overlord’s command in the Overlord’s service’,’ she prompted him, amused.

Farwalker gulped. ‘But I... I am no Lord! I can’t...’

Brat said suddenly in her most carrying Storyteller voice, ‘Hear now the words of Foreseer Swansister when she was told of the deaths of Lady Brighthair, Overlord’s Daughter, and that of her Lord, Steelsure,

*The dead have left a rent behind
Which none now living shall rebind
Until there comes one who shall be,
Until the sight that all shall see:
An Overlord in chains
Who still the chains disdains
And even though a prisoner bound, walks free,
Supported by the bow
That deals both weal and woe,
One line to end, another to begin.
And there to read the sign*

*Child of the Witch's line,
Witness unrecognised, caught in Fate's gin.*

'Gather said I should know what it meant when I saw it and now I have and now I do.

'Graycat is the Overlord in chains and Farwalker's bow has supported her and ended Freeforest's line and begun another, his own. And I, the only descendant of the Last Sorceress, the Lady Dragonfriend, am the Witness. So it has all come true,' she finished, wondering why the torches seemed suddenly so dim. She was feeling dreadfully sick and dizzy and it was growing darker and darker...

Brat Storyteller slid down at the Overlord's feet in a dead faint.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Brat opened her eyes. She blinked and stared. She was lying in a rich bed in a strange room, in broad daylight. She turned her head. Farwalker was standing at the foot of the bed and a beautiful old woman was sitting beside it and beaming encouragingly at her.

‘Am I awake?’ she asked doubtfully.

Farwalker laughed and said, ‘Storyteller Sweetvoice, I present to you your husband’s sister-son’s daughter, Brook Weaveword’s-daughter Storyteller.’

Brat tried to sit up to make the correct acknowledgement but Sweetvoice leaned forward and pressed her gently down. ‘Never heed him, lassie. All is well. Lady Jewel brought you home with her and you have been sleeping ever since.’

‘Thank you,’ Brat said gratefully. ‘But how long have I been asleep?’ She squinted at the slant of the sunlight, trying to guess at the time. It must be either early morning or late evening.

Farwalker laughed. ‘You have slept a night and a day and another night! It’s tomorrow morning now.’

‘Oh-h. No wonder I’m so hungry! I haven’t eaten anything since... why, since those pasties Shrimp – I mean Strongtower – stole for me!’

‘Well, as soon as Lady Jewel’s healer has seen you and said that you may get up, there will be a firstmeal waiting,’ promised Sweetvoice, rising to her feet. ‘We’ll leave you to her, now.’

‘Oh, wait, please! What has been happening? Is Gray well? And Gather...’

‘All is well, and you shall have answers to all your questions in a little while,’ Sweetvoice assured her. ‘Come, Lord Farwalker.’

Farwalker grinned at Brat’s startled face. ‘I am not accustomed to it yet, either,’ he said ruefully. ‘I suppose I shall be, some time.’

Bathed, dressed in the finest clothes she’d ever dreamed of wearing, her hair trimmed and threaded with tiny jewels, Brat walked carefully down a

flight of highly polished stairs and along a wide hallway to a room where the morning sun and air poured in through unshuttered windows.

Here, around a table, sat Farwalker, Silkentongue, Sweetvoice and Lady Jewel, eating their first meal. Brook stopped short in the doorway, feeling more self-conscious in her new finery than she ever had in rags. Then she saw Lady Jewel's hand held out to her and the smile of greeting that lit up her lined face and she relaxed.

'Come and be seated, my dear,' said Lady Jewel. 'Forgive us for not waiting for you. We were all hungry and my maid warned us that she would be some time in dressing you. Time well spent, I see!'

The others seemed to agree with her. Brook, very conscious of Farwalker's amazed stare, slid into a chair, thanked her hostess and began to eat eagerly. As soon as she had taken the first edge off her hunger, she started to ask questions.

'Where is Gray? I mean Lady Quicksilver? Is Gather all right? What happened after I fainted? I never fainted before, ever. I didn't think it would feel like that. Was it very awkward for everyone? Was the Overlord cross about it?'

Farwalker interrupted her. 'I'm fairly well used to your cross-examinations, Brat, but Lady Jewel and your new-found relatives are not. Slow down just a little, please!'

Lady Jewel laughed. 'Fill your mouth again, child, and we shall answer while you chew! Graycat is well, having slept nearly as long as you, and is now with the Overlord. He, by the way, wishes to see you when you are ready. He will receive you whensoever you come to the Great House. Those are the exact words of the message!'

Brook drew in her breath. Was it? Could Lady Jewel mean...? She sat speechless, her mouth full of bread and honey, and goggled at Jewel.

The Lady nodded at her. 'Yes, Storyteller, you now have the Right of Immediate Audience. So there is one of your questions answered for you. The Overlord is very far from cross! He is extremely pleased with you and grateful. He will tell you himself as soon as you go to the Great House.'

'But...' began Brat. The Right of Immediate Audience was an extraordinary honour generally reserved for great heroes. Dumbfounded, Brook Storyteller turned her gaze on Farwalker. He laughed outright.

'In fact, Brat, your faint was well timed. It helped to convince some of the Landholders of your sincerity and gave everyone something else,

besides my undeserved elevation, to think about. Then after all the drama, Graycat's ratification by the Gathering was almost a relief. So that slipped down their gullets more easily than it otherwise would. Although,' he added with a tinge of bitterness, 'I do believe that that poor crazed fool Freeforest did more than all of us to make the Overlord's choice acceptable.'

Brook recovered her voice. 'The Overlord planned it? Gray arriving in chains? He sent Captain Bearslayer to get her out of the dungeon, but he waited until the last minute. What would he have done if Farwalker had already rescued her?'

'Whatever seemed useful,' replied Lady Jewel. 'The Overlord, like any other ruler, uses chance to aid his designs. He did not plan Graycat's dramatic arrival, nor Freeforest's madness, but he used them both. As he used your presence, Storyteller, to help his plan along; and yours, too, Archer.'

Brook was recovering from her awed amazement. 'What happened after the Landholders agreed about Graycat? What did Freeborn and the others do? Where was Bull? I thought I saw him in the crowd at the gates of the Great House; and what about Gather?'

'Gather is very much better, I promise you, Brat,' said Farwalker reassuringly. 'I had a message from her last night to say that Medley and Stark were spoiling her to death and she would like your company when you should be free to visit her.'

'And before you ask, your friend Strongtower is swaggering round the City refusing to answer to Shrimp any longer and almost too grand to speak to any of us!'

'Now, about what happened after Graycat was acclaimed. Freeborn and his friends went out to the crowd at the gates to tell them what had been happening and Graycat and I went too, to confirm it. And then,' his tone was warm with amusement, 'Gray yawned fit to crack her jaws and told them that she was ready to fall asleep standing and if they would all go home and let her go to bed, she'd be almost as grateful as she was for their support.'

'They cheered her so loudly that I'm surprised it didn't wake you, half way to this Hold though you were by then. Then they all went home as peaceful as could be; all except Bull. He refused to leave Graycat. He simply picked her up and carried her back into the Great House and told

the doorwardens to find her a bed at once; which they did. She was asleep before she reached it. I believe Bull spent the night before the door of her room.

‘Lady Jewel invited me here so that there would be a familiar face for you to see when you woke. I must leave you soon, though. I have to go to Freeforest’s Hold today to take possession.’

He sounded as if he did not much like the task and Brook opened her mouth to ask if she might go with him. Then she remembered the Overlord’s invitation.

‘Bowyer Heartwood will want to see that Scathe has come to no harm,’ she said. ‘Do you suppose he would like to go with you?’ Farwalker gave her an appreciative grin. ‘To hold my hand?’ he asked.

Silkentongue, who had been listening with a smile, said something in his beautiful voice and all heads as usual turned to him; but amazingly, Brook did not hear what he said.

She was remembering with a shock what The Bowyer had told her when they first met, that Graycat would not stay with Farwalker forever. And now that Graycat was Lady Quicksilver again and the Young Overlord, she would surely not be able to stay with him. But she was still Graycat; no-one was calling her Quicksilver, Brook noticed. Perhaps she and Farwalker could still be companions, at least until she became The Overlord.

Brook went to see the Overlord with Storyteller Silkentongue as escort. Lady Jewel had sent a discreet message beforehand to be certain that the Overlord was not busy.

‘The Right of Immediate Audience is not to be used lightly,’ she remarked to Brook. ‘However, since we know the Overlord wishes to see you, it cannot be said that you are using the Right on this occasion.’

Silkentongue left her at the door to the Overlord’s private apartments. ‘I shall wait for you here,’ he told her, with secret amusement. Brat did not notice. She was too intent on nerving herself to enter the room. To her delight and relief, Graycat was with the Overlord. They both smiled at her.

‘Welcome, Storyteller Brook.’ said the Overlord

Brat froze, halfway through her bow. Then she forced herself to complete it, her mind racing. She had dreamed, just as every Storyteller’s child did, of the day when she would no longer be an apprentice, a Storyteller by courtesy and family only, but a Journeyman. And after that, at last, a Master Storyteller with the right to put Storyteller before her

name, not after. This must be a mistake. No-one became a Master like this, unforeseen and unheralded!

She tried to speak, stammered and almost choked. 'Oh, no!' she gasped at last, 'If it please the Overlord, this one is but an apprentice, not a Master t-to be Entitled!'

'Did I not tell you, Lord?' said Graycat, amused. 'Reason with her, I beg!'

'We can do better,' said the Overlord. He raised his voice, 'Let The Storyteller enter!'

Silkentongue's bow was almost informal. He was plainly at his ease and Brat watched him enviously. He smiled at her, bowed again to Graycat and said, 'It is as the Young Overlord predicted?'

'Tell her, Silkentongue. She won't believe us,' said Graycat, resigned.

Silkentongue turned to his great-niece. 'Brook Weaveword's daughter,' he began severely, 'you have claimed before the whole of the Great Gathering to be Remembrancer to the Young Overlord. You have told one of the Great Stories before that same Gathering. You have told your own Story of Graycat and Farwalker and your journey with them first to Bowyer Heartwood and then to Shrimp Streetskimmer, each time maintaining the truth yet varying the telling to suit your listener. You have earned your living by storytelling during your journey. Heartwood has actually entrusted his own Life Story to you!

'Lastly, you have Storyteller-Named your friend Shrimp Streetskimmer, giving him a Name to live up to. A Strong Tower he shall indeed become. To all this there are witnesses, from the Overlord himself to Strongtower Streetskimmer.

'As a Master Storyteller have you acted. Master Storyteller shall you be titled; and 'Spellbinder' shall you be Named!'

Brat found herself shaking all over. She wanted either to laugh wildly or to weep as wildly and did not know which. She tried to make some sort of acknowledgment, heard herself say, 'Father! He would have been so proud!' and felt a sob trying to force itself up into her throat. She cast about for something to stop herself crying and remembered Lord Eaglon with a sudden savage rage that dried her tears at once.

Graycat was thinking of him, too. Her expression might have seemed merely thoughtful to a stranger; but Brat knew that absent, almost blank look. Gray's dark hawk face, with the narrow eyes and high cheekbones of

her family and the thin high-bridged nose so like the Overlord's own, was full of secret thought, boding ill for the subject of her brooding.

Graycat gave Brat Spellbinder a brief nod. 'I have not forgotten Storyteller Weaveword,' she said, 'nor Eaglon.'

The Overlord nodded. 'Lord Eaglon must be dealt with,' he said.

Brat bowed. She could, maybe should, leave Eaglon's punishment to the Overlord. But it was for her, Wordweave's only child, to repay Eaglon for her father's death. She was safe now. Eaglon could do nothing to her. But... If the Overlord had Eaglon brought to trial, who knew what might come of it? There was the secret that Weaveword had died to protect. There were all the members of the Fellowship to keep safe. What would Weaveword have wanted? She bowed again to the Overlord.

'Most honoured lord,' she said, 'by your leave, let you not concern yourself with Eaglon.'

'He is Nothing.'

EPILOGUE

*And so it was. And so Weaveword was avenged. As the old rhyme says,
The Storyteller's name for you
Clings fast to your life's end;
And the Story that he tells of you
May last to the World's end.*

There was nowhere in the Joined Lands for Lord Nothing to go; nowhere that his new name and Story had not already reached. The Storytellers saw to that.

Nobody was surprised when he made over his Landholdings, with the Overlord's permission, to a distant cousin and left the country.

Less than a month later he was killed in a drunken quarrel with a soldier of fortune. It took several weeks for the news to reach the Joined Lands. No-one cared enough to pass the story along. He had indeed become Nothing.

Strangely enough, it was the Young Overlord's Court Storyteller, Remembrancer and Witness, called Brat by her closest friends, who, when the news finally reached her, seemed grieved. She told her friend the Streetskimmer Strongtower that she was afraid that she had misused her powers by Naming Lord Eaglon into Nothing.

But, as everyone knows, Storytellers are not like other folk.